

The meeting of Wellington and the Prussian general staff at Bussy.

This note is a reconstruction of what has been said and agreed upon during the conversation between Wellington and the Prussian staff at Bussy.

The sources.

The first eyewitness to write about the meeting was Von Müffling. In his work " Geschichte des Feldzuges im Jahre 1815 " (under the pseudonyme CvW in 1816) he writes: " Es entstand jetzt die Frage auf welche Art der Herzog Wellington den Fürsten Blücher auf die wirksamste Art würde unterstützen können, da der Angriff ganz auf diesen gerichtet schien. Der Herzog erbot sich das was er bei Frasnes vor seiner Front hatte, über den Haufen zu werfen und auf Gosselies zu marschieren. Die Bewegung musste sehr entscheidend werden, allein es war nicht wahrscheinlich, dass sie der Herzog noch im Laufe des Tages würde ausführen können, und man fürchtete dass der Fürst Blücher Gefahr lief, von der ganzen Macht Bonapartes erdrückt zu werden, ehe diese Umgehung vollendet sei. Es würde daher zweckmaessiger gehalten dass die Wellingtonsche Armee auf der Chaussee von Quatre Bras zur unterstützung heranrückte. In der Absicht dies auszuführen kam der Herzog Wellington gegen 3 Uhr wieder bei Quatre Bras an. "

Von Müffling wrote another version of the events in his memoirs which were published in 1844. He writes: "On the way [to Brye] the duke said to me: "If, as seems likely, the division of the enemy's forces posted at Frasnes, opposite Quatre Bras, is inconsiderable, and only intended to mask the English army, I can employ my whole strength in support of the field-marshal, and will gladly execute all his wishes in regard to joint operations." [...] "The duke met the field marshal at the windmill of Brye. His corps d'armée had just been placed in their positions, while some officers observed Napoleon's advance from the *tombe de Ligny*. The duke looked over the measures taken, and seemed satisfied with them. When the heads of Napoleon's attacking columns shewed themselves moving up St.Amand, the duke asked the fieldmarshal and general Von Gneisenau: "Que voulez vous que je fasse ?" In few words I had already told the latter that the duke had the best intentions to support the fieldmarshal, and that he would do all they wished, provided they did not expect him to divide his army, which was contrary to his principles. As few troops had yet arrived at Quatre Bras, and the English reserve (which was directed thither) could not reach it before four in the afternoon, it seemed to me important that Wellington's troops should concentrate in front, somewhere beyond Frasnes, from thence advance in a straight line towards the Prussian right (Wagnilé) [sic] and there forming a right angle with the Prussian position, immediately encircle Napoleon's left wing. General Von Gneisenau shook his head at this proposition, but I did not know what objections he had to make to it. Now, to the Duke's question, he replied, that the most desirable plan for the Prussian army would be, for the duke, as soon as his army assembled at Quatre Bras, to march off to the left on the chaussée to Namur, and place himself at Brye in rear of the Prussian army as a reserve. [...] But in this case the English army must march off from Quatre Bras at four; and Gneisenau knew, *through me*, that at this hour *the reserve* could hardly have arrived there after a march of five or six (German) miles. This proposition, therefore, was by no means favourable to the Prussian army, since it was based upon impossibilities, nor could it be accepted by the English leader, who had the Dutch troops under his orders; because, in taking a flank march to the left from Quatre Bras, he must give up the two roads leading from the enemy to Brussels, and expose the capital of Belgium, which was quite contrary to his instructions.

The duke looked at his map and did not answer one word. I saw how much he disliked the proposition, and therefore made the following observations: -

According to this proposition the English army must wait till the whole is assembled, in complete inactivity, at Quatre Bras, at a distance of 12.000 paces from the Prussians, without being able to render them the least assistance. If, however, the English army advances to the point where the Roman road intersects the chaussée from Quatre Bras to Charleroi (one German mile and a half), they would not then be more than 6000 paces from the Prussian right wing, and by deploying to the left, they would touch upon fieldmarshal Blücher, and have favourable ground for fighting and manoeuvring. The corps of the prince of Orange will have little farther to march to the point of intersection specified, from Nivelles than from Quatre Bras; and the right wing from Ath is even nearer the former.

In this manner I avoided publicly mentioning the duke's erroneous calculations as to the time in which his army would be assembled, as well as Gneisenau's incorrect calculations as to the arrival of the English army at Brye; and the duke eagerly caught at my proposal, saying: "Je culbuterai ce qu'il y a devant moi à Frasnès, me dirigeant sur Gosselies."

General Gneisenau refuted all that was said in favour of this movement by these words: "It is too long and insecure; the march from Quatre Bras to Brye is, on the contrary, safe and decisive." The duke replied: "Well! I will come, provided *I am not attacked myself*."²

Hofmann's book (1849) contains a letter written by Von Müffling to him in which he writes about the meeting. He writes: "Wir fanden den Fürsten Blücher an der Windmühle von Brye, entschlossen, die Schlacht anzunehmen obgleich das Korps Von Bülow noch fehlte. Napoleon war bereits im Vorrücken von Fleurus begriffen. Vom linken Flügel, der die Nacht in der Gegend von Gosselies zugebracht haben musste, hörte und sah man nichts. Es blieb daher völlig ungewiss, ob Napoleon sich zum Angriff des rechten Flügels, des Centrums oder des linken Flügels der Preussischen Armee konzentriren werde.

Mir schien es ganz zweifellos, dass die Vereinigung vor dem Centrum erfolgen werde, weil dann die beiden Flügel von Fleurus und Gosselies einen gleichen Weg zurückzulegen hatten; während bei einer Vereinigung vor dem Preussischen linken Flügel der Marsch von Gosselies längs der Fronte der Preussischen Stellung mehr als das doppelte der Entfernung betragen hätte, welche Napoleon von Fleurus zurückzulegen hätte. Ferner musste es von Einfluss sein, dass der Feind gestern Abend Infanterie der Englischen Armee bei Quatrebras gefunden hatte. Wie der Herzog die Sache ansah, weiss ich nicht, indess schlug er vor, mit der Englischen Armee auf Frasnès vorzurücken und bei der Schlacht in der Richtung gegen die Römerstrasse sich an die Preussische Armee anzuschliessen. Ich erwartete dass dieser Vorschlag sofort angenommen werden würde. Allein der Wortführer, General Von Gneisenau, unterstützt vom General Von Grolmann, trat dem Herzog mit der bestimmte Ansicht entgegen, dass Napoleon den Preussischen linken Flügel angreifen werde, und dass die von ihm, dem Herzog, vorgeschlagene Bewegung so viel Zeit erforderte dass sie der Absicht, die Preussische Armee dadurch zu unterstützen in keiner Art entspreche. In dem Augenblick als dies besprochen wurde, sah man bereits tiefe Infanterie-Kolonnen aus Fleurus sich nähern, ohne eine bestimmte Richtung erkennen zu können; dagegen war von der Seite von Gosselies nichts zu gewahren. Dass der linke Flügel der feindlichen Armee in der Bewegung war, konnte nicht bezweifelt werden, wo aber war er zu suchen? Die Chaussée von Gosselies nach Quatrebras was nicht zu übersehen. Mir blieb kein Zweifel, dass er dort zu suchen sei. Wellington äusserte sich nicht sondern fragte: "Eh bien, que voulez vous que je fasse?" und darauf äusserte Gneisenau: "Alles von Quatre Bras auf der Chaussee nach Sombreffe bis an die Römerstrasse marschieren lassen und dort als Reserve für die Preussische Armee aufstellen." - "Das kann doch nur für den Fall eintreten, wenn ich nicht selbst bei Quatre Bras angegriffen werde?" Dies wurde bejaht und Wellington stieg zu Pferde. Ich sah durch diese Berabredungen grosses Unglück für die Preussische Armee voraus. In der erbärmlichen Stellung von Quatrebras, durch die Höhen von Frasnès in einem Kessel beschränkt, von welchem aus man gar nicht erfahren konnte, ob man

eine Brigade oder eine Armee vor sich hatte; wer konnte den richtigen Zeitpunkt zum Abmarsch von Quatrebras zur neuen Rolle als Reserve angeben ? Das Ungünstige unserer Lage war dadurch entstanden, dass der General von Zieten am 15ten um 11 Uhr von Marchienne ab, dem Feinde alles eingeräumt hatte, um mit seinen Spitzen am Abend bei Quatrebras zu sein.

Auf einen solchen Vorgang war die Versammlung der Englischen Truppen bei Quatrebras am 16ten nicht berechnet. Sie mussten dort immer zu spät ankommen. Wir hatten die Division Picton und Herzog von Braunschweig auf ihrem Marsche von Brüssel nach Quatrebras überholt. Die Hitze des Tages war gross; die Leute waren durch den Marsch sehr ermattet. Es musste oft geruht werden, und Ich glaube nicht, dass diese Truppen vor 6 Uhr Abends bei Quatrebras eintreffen konnten.

Ich verweilte daher noch um den Generalen Von Gneisenau und Von Grolman diese besondere Umstände und meine Ueberzeugung mitzuteilen, dass Wellington angegriffen würde; sie also auf keine Unterstützung von der Englischen Armee zu rechnen hätten Dass Bülow nicht ankommen konnte, war zu dieser Zeit gewiss. Ich holte den Herzog ein; wir fanden bei unserer Ankunft in Quatre Bras den Marschall Ney bereits dergestalt im Angriff, dass ich dem Fürsten bestimmt melden konnte: der Herzog kann keine Hilfe senden." ³

Another eyewitness, Von Dörnberg, states: " Nachdem einige Worte gesprochen, sagte der Herzog zum General Von Gneisenau: " Sagen Sie mir doch Ihre Meinung, was Sie wünschen dass ich thun soll ? Gneisenau nahm die Karte in die Hand und sagte: Wenn Sie das, was Ihnen bei Quatre Bras entgegensteht, über den Haufen werfen und rasch vorgehen können, so würde dies das grösste Resultat hervorbringen, indem Sie dadurch der Französischen Armee in den Rücken kommen - da dorthin aber nur kleine Wege führen, so wäre das sicherste wenn Sie was vor Ihnen steht festhalten, und mit dem Rest der Armee links abmarschierten, so kämen Sie auf unsern rechten Flügel und der Französischen Armee in die linke Flanke." Der Herzog antwortete: "Das Raisonement ist richtig, ich werde sehen, was gegen mich steht und wie viel von meiner Armee angekommen ist, um demgemäss zu handeln. - ohne irgend etwas zu sagen dass er sich für das Eine oder das Andere entschiede, oder ohne irgend ein Versprechen zu geben." ⁴

Another version comes from Von Damitz (1837 - 1838). His work is largely based upon the papers of Von Grolman, so his influence in this was substantial, but it should be stressed that this version of the events is not a direct source. ⁵ Von Damitz writes:

" Um diese Zeit war es auch, als der herzog von Wellington zum Fürsten Blücher kam, um mit ihm die letzte Verabredungen zu treffen. Man kam über die Art, sich gegenseitig zu unterstützen, darin überein, dass eine Operation mit allen disponibelen Kräften des Herzogs über Frasne nach Gosselies den Feind in Flanke und Rücken nehmen, und seinen Rückzug nach Charleroi bewerkstelligen würde. Jedoch musste dies Vorrücken mit sehr überlegenen Kräften, wo möglich mit der ganzen Armee geschehen, und man musste bis 4 Uhr Nachmittags den Erfolg dieser Operationen absehen können. Von 5 Uhr an lag es in der Natur der Dinge, dass die Wechselfälle in der Schlacht eintreten müssten, und dann wurde eine directe Unterstützung vortheilhafter, als eine entferntere Offensive. Diese directe Hülfleistung gegen den Preussischen rechten Flügel zu führen, sollte den eingetretenen Umständen und dem Ermessen des Herzogs überlassen bleiben.

Während des war die Französische Armee über Fleurus vorgerückt. Der Herzog schien jetzt erst die bestimmte Ueberzeugung zu gewinnen, dass Napoleon mit seinen Hauptkräften gegen die Preussen operire. Bis um $\frac{3}{4}$ 2 Uhr wartete derselbe die völlige Entwicklung des Französischen Heeres ab und eilte dann erst zu seinem Heere zurück.

Als der Herzog von Wellington die bestimmte Versicherung der Hülfleistung gab, bediente er sich die Worte: " Ich bin überzeugt dass um 2 Uhr so viel Truppen versammelt sind, dass ich die Offensive sogleich ergreifen kann." Nach dieser festen Zusicherung wurde von Preussischer

Seite eigentlich erst definitiv die Schlacht anzunehmen beschlossen." ⁶

When Von Damitz wrote his work (in the mid 30's of the 19th century), only the first version of Von Müffling had been published. He didn't know Von Dörnberg's manuscript either.

As Von Damitz suggests Wellington might be able to push back the enemy in front of him and get behind the enemy's lines present at the position of Fleurus. This manoeuvre had the disadvantage that it might be too late for the Prussians and therefore direct support over the road leading from Nivelles to Namur would be a better option. Despite that Von Damitz suggests that Wellington had good hopes for starting the offensive, it was still up to Wellington to determine what to do, depending on the circumstances. In this sense, there is a conditional promise to support.

Soon, however, Wellington had to forget about his expectations to support the Prussians as soon as he saw how the situation at Quatre Bras developed.

Von Damitz then claims that only then the Prussian staff took the firm decision to accept battle, despite Wellington's conditional promise of support. ⁷ It may very well be that Von Damitz here follows Wagner, who already wrote in 1825: "Um 1 Uhr, kurz vor dem Anfange der Schlacht, kam der Herzog von Wellington auf die Höhe der Windmühle bei Brye und hatte mit dem Feldmarschall Blücher eine Unterredung, wobei er ihm die Versicherung gab, dass in diesem Augenblick seine Armee versammelt sei, und dass er sie sogleich in Bewegung setzen werde; dagegen versprach der letztere das Gefecht in einer Stellung anzunehmen, die wenig Vortheile bot, und ersuchte den Englischen Feldherrn, seine Operationen auf den linken Flügel des Feindes zu richten. Der Entschluss in der genommenen Stellung eine Schlacht zu liefern wurde eigentlich erst jetzt ganz fest, weil der Preussische Feldherr die Überzeugung erhielt, dass ohne dieselbe die Zusammenziehung der Englischen Armee sehr gefährdet sei. Darin aber liegt auch die Ursache warum in den Dörfern so wenig Massregeln für die Vertheidigung getroffen werden konnten." ⁸

Wellington himself also wrote about the meeting, but late and in a most general way. He writes: "[...] and he went on from thence [Quatre Bras] to the Prussian army which was in sight, formed on the heights behind Ligny and St.Amand. He there communicated personally with marshal prince Blücher and the headquarters of the Prussian army." ⁹

On the 20th of July 1838, colonel Hardinge wrote to colonel Gurwood about the meeting: "The duke, after conferring with Blücher and Gneisenau at the windmill, promised to support the Prussians towards the evening by a British force. His Grace gave his opinion to Gneisenau as to the defective mode of occupying the position, &c.; and he afterwards turned to me, predicting that the position would be forced; and shortly afterwards returned to Quatre Bras [...]" ¹⁰

Lord FitzRoy Somerset also wrote about the meeting. He says: "The duke accompanied by his staff and a small escort of cavalry rode from Quatre Bras between 11 and 12 o'clock to Blücher's positions. The marshal was at the Batti St.Croix. The Prussian troops were found in close column on the heights in rear of St.Amand and Ligny which were occupied and the left of the Prussian army extended beyond Sombreffe.

The duke and Blücher saw the French in great force advancing towards the Prussians and the duke observed to Blücher he would soon be attacked. The duke, expecting that our cavalry, the remainder of the prince of Orange's corps, the guards and Alten's division would arrive at Quatre Bras about 2 o'clock, told Blücher that he would give him all the support in his power and the duke galloped [sic] back to Quatre Bras which he reached about half past 2 o'clock."

¹¹

Observations.

As the conversation probably took about three quarters of an hour, a lot of things were said and

one can assume that the quotations given by the participants and eye-witnesses are a selection of what has been said. Taking all accounts together, a basic pattern of how the conversation developed can be deduced:

- the observation of the French, coming out from Fleurus.¹²
- a proposal from Wellington how he saw his role to support the Prussian army
- the Prussian objection to this proposal
- Wellington's request to the Prussians of how they saw his role
- the Prussian proposal
- Wellington's reaction
- concluding arrangements of Wellington and Gneisenau

Before analyzing the arrangements about cooperation, it is first of all important to state that after Wellington had observed the Prussian position and after both he and the Prussian general staff saw the French streaming from Fleurus, the conclusion was that this was the majority of the French army deploying in front of the Prussian army.

Further, it is important to stress as well that the subject of the meeting was not *whether* the duke would be willing to assist the Prussians in a battle which clearly seemed imminent, but *how*.

Wellington's proposal comes out as one to push back the enemy as far as beyond Frasnes and to move to the French which stood in position in front of Blücher. This is portrayed as either a manoeuvre along the Roman road towards the rear of the French left wing / flank, or one - through Gosselies - to the east, right into Napoleon's rear.

In both cases a position south of Frasnes was the one to aim for as an area of concentration from where the manoeuvre to the main French army could be carried out.

As a result of general arrangements set long before the campaign, such a manoeuvre was regarded by both parties as decisive, but now in the current situation of the 16th of June as too time-consuming. The concern was that by the time the manoeuvre would have been completed, the Prussian army would have been defeated by Napoleon.

The objection was raised by the Prussians, but was apparently seen by Wellington as well. After the request done by the duke what to do instead, the Prussians then proposed Wellington to move his army over the Namur road towards the Prussian army to act as a reserve. In that function, two places were mentioned: in the centre rear of the army, or at the right flank, near Trois Burettes.

Both parties agreed upon the fact that this was the way to go, but at the same time it was obvious for both parties that this arrangement could only be complied with as long as Wellington wasn't attacked himself; it was therefore left to the duke to decide and act according to the circumstances at the crossroads. In this context, it should also be stressed that by the time he left the prince at Quatre Bras no further orders were issued by the duke for the further concentration of the army there; this is what the prince did to some extent himself by 2 p.m., while the remaining orders herefore were given by the duke after his return at the crossroads.

In the total array of testimonies on the meeting held at Bussy, Von Müffling has a major share. Though the structure of all his three versions of the meeting maybe rather similar, the strong difference is in the role he assigns himself. While the first very one is phrased from a basic common agreement what would be wise to do and the third one does so a bit more from a discussion, it is in his memoirs that Von Müffling portrays the conversation as one of a much more polarised point of view of Wellington and Gneisenau. This results in a situation in which Von Müffling enlarges his role as the strong negotiator between them. Though Von Müffling's memoirs contain some elements of importance they reduce the role of the duke in the meeting to

almost nil, as only in saying “Que voulez vous que je fasse” ,“Je culbuterai ce qu’il y a devant moi à Frasnes, me dirigeant sur Gosselies” and “Well, I will come, provided I am not attacked myself”. To accept that Wellington, with his dominant and autocratic way of handling matters, would have played this role and Von Müffling the other is totally unlogical. It is logical that Von Müffling played a minor role by expressing some explanations etc. but to accept that he played the role as he sketches in his memoirs make these memoirs lose a lot of their credibility in this particular subject.

Von Dörnberg has Gneisenau launch *both* options, whereupon Wellington – agreeing upon his favouring the one of a supporting march over the Namur towards the Roman road – agreed to comply with this one, but this would depend on the situation at Quatre Bras. Von Dörnberg himself states that the duke “ohne irgend etwas zu sagen dass er sich für das Eine oder das Andere entschiede, oder ohne irgend ein Versprechen zu geben.”

Wellington does agree with Gneisenau’s reasoning and that he wanted to see whether he would be able to comply with it, depending upon the situation at Quatre Bras. So, again here, it is the concluding statement that both commanders chose for Wellington moving over the Namur road towards the Prussian army, but that the decision to do so was left to Wellington after assessing the situation at Quatre Bras. The choice for this way of support, coupled to the conditional element from the side of Wellington, can also be found in Von Müffling’s versions.¹³

Von Damitz’ account halts between two opinions and this may very well have been caused by the fact that this historian used authentic papers from Von Grolmann on the one hand (whatever these may have been) and his own ideas on the other.

Though some hindsight has crept in (for instance in the words “letzte Verabredungen” and in the calculations into specific hours in time), it is in the first part of his account that Von Damitz pretty confirms what the other accounts relate as well: the agreement of both commanders that a support along the Brussels road would take too long and that therefore the choice fell upon a direct support through the road leading from Quatre Bras to Namur, so towards the right of the Prussian army. And it is also here that the conditional element comes in as “Diese directe Hülfleistung gegen den Preussischen rechten Flügel zu führen, sollte den eingetretenen Umständen und dem Ermessen des Herzogs überlassen bleiben.”

If Von Damitz would have described the events at Bussy in this way, it would be a balanced – though indirect - eyewitness–account, but it is in his final statements that he contradicts himself. As he had just stated that any support from Wellington was to be left upon Wellington to decide, depending on the circumstances, it is there that he simply states as if Wellington suddenly would have given a “festen Zusicherung” for support, knowing that he would have enough forces available to do so by 2 p.m. – as if he would know this before the conversation started.

It is again Von Damitz himself here who comes in, and this statement is aggravated by the one as, based upon this promise of support from the duke, that the Prussians “definitiv die Schlacht anzunehmen beschlossen.” Yet, this decision had been taken long before.¹⁴

As has been stated before, it is very well possible that Damitz took over Wagner’s version, which is highly erroneous in itself. Apart from the fact that this version also mentions this definitive decision of the Prussian staff, it describes as if Wellington had completed his concentration, as if Blücher had a low esteem of the position of Sombreffe while the Prussians had selected it themselves long before the war started and that Blücher would have asked Wellington to move in the French left, while the Prussian high command actually requested him to move in their own (right) rear.

The presence of a strong body of forces at Quatre Bras at 2 p.m. is also mentioned by lord FitzRoy Somerset. FitzRoy Somerset, however, doesn’t relate anything about the talks as they

went what had to be done in the situation, but merely shows what Wellington would have said as a result of them. Other than that, the words as cited from the duke are incorrect as by the time he would have expressed them, all units mentioned weren't ordered to Quatre Bras so this doesn't add up to the understanding of the events.

Nor does Wellington very brief account: it is merely a very short description of events and contains nothing about the actual content of the communications between him and the Prussian leadership. Hardinge's brief account shows Wellington as giving a full promise and in this sense his version of the events doesn't match the conditional element as stated upon by other eyewitness. Though Hardinge's version as such has its relevance, his words do not cover the complete thing, as by far most other eye-witness agree on the conditional element as expressed in the promise.

Von Pflugk Harttung is one of the very few historians, if not the only one, who devoted an extensive chapter of what would have been said at Bussy. His conclusion is that the arrangement agreed upon was a compromise of different scenarios and which meant: "in case there would be enough Anglo-Netherlands-German troops at Quatre Bras, Wellington would advance through Frasnes as far as Gosselies, drive the French towards Charleroi and attack Napoleon in the rear. This presumption was based on Wellington's superiority; the result of this action should not last until after 4 p.m. If not, then till 5 p.m. a more direct support to the Prussians would be more useful as a distant offensive. In how far Wellington was willing and able to carry out this manoeuvre was not taken into the agreement as this was dependent on Wellington's judgement and the circumstances at that time, and thereby gave the duke the free hand to act as he wanted."

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While both Von Müffling, in all his versions, as well as Von Dörnberg, clearly point to the common choice for the direct support over the Namur road towards the Roman road, it is striking to note that Von Pflugk Harttung comes to a very different conclusion. Apart from that, he is misled in the way Von Müffling describes the place where the Prussian leadership wanted to have Wellington's army in reserve. As Von Müffling uses two descriptions, Von Pflugk Harttung sees them as two versions of the Prussian request, but they are just two different descriptions of basically the same idea: for Wellington's army to act as a reserve to the right rear of the Prussian army, near the Roman road.

This is the same as with Wellington's proposal which is being detailed as a manoeuvre along the Roman road towards the French left and the Prussian right flank, or one through Gosselies in Napoleon's rear. They are both components, yet remembered in different ways, of the same idea: to operate in the French rear or flank. This contrary to the other way of cooperation: a direct junction of both allied armies over the Namur road.

By using Von Müffling's memoirs too much, Von Pflugk Harttung is dragged into the atmosphere of an unnatural strong disagreement between both commanders and therefore is forced to use an extra non-existent scenario for them to reach a compromise.¹⁶

Before the talks started, Von Müffling claims he would have told Gneisenau that Wellington "had the best intentions to support the fieldmarshal [Blücher] and that he would do all they [the Prussians] wished, provided they did not expect him to divide his army, which was contrary to his principles." This may very well be possible, as this principle was indeed of primary importance for the duke, but the way it was applied to the arrangement settled at Bussy hints to the contrary.

On the one hand Von Müffling mentions in his accounts the whole of Wellington's army as "die Wellingtonsche Armee" (1816), "as soon as his army assembled at Quatre Bras" and "the whole is assembled" (1844) before considering any supportive action, he also mentions "Alles von Quatre Bras." (1849), which clearly refers only to those forces present at that point by the

time he would return there.

Von Dörnberg is more unambiguous in his version of the meeting in the sense that Wellington clearly made a distinction of what he expected to have at Quatre Bras by the time he would return there and then to decide what to do with it: “Ich werde sehen, was gegen mich steht und wie viel von meiner Armee angekommen ist, un demgemäss zu handeln.”

In case we may consider Von Damitz’ first passage as the most authentic one, this one refers to “mit allen disponibelen Kräften des Herzogs” at Quatre Bras to be used for support to the Prussian army. Lord FitzRoy Somerset also hints in the same direction by using the words “he would give him all the support in his power.” This would mean that at Bussy the discussion on Wellington’s support related to forces at or around *Quatre Bras* and *not Nivelles*, which was Wellington’s original operational base.

It is in the context of this issue that the reports written by the Prussian leadership on the 17th of June and beyond should be entered into.¹⁷ The question is whether they add anything to understand what was agreed upon at Bussy.

How authentic these reports are, as they were written in the days after the battle of Ligny was fought, their value is to be assessed with care as they were written in an atmosphere of frustration. On the 17th of June, at about 2 p.m. ,Gneisenau wrote to general Von Knesebeck:

“[...] Als am 15. bereits das 1. Armeekorps ebenfalls ein sehr lang dauerndes Gefecht bestanden hatte, erhielten wir von dem Herzoge Wellington die schriftliche Zusicherung, dass, wenn der Feind uns angreifen sollte, er in dessen Rücken ihn hinwiederum angreifen würde; ein Gleiches erwartete er von uns, wenn er angegriffen werden sollte.”

It is here that Gneisenau clearly refers to the promise as done by Wellington through Von Müffling’s letter of 7 p.m. of the 15th of June, and which was based from the area around Nivelles. While on the one hand Gneisenau doesn’t mention the conditional element as it was mentioned in this letter with so many words, it becomes clear in these words on the other hand that Gneisenau had well understood the conditional element of the promise towards him: in case the French main attack would *not* be on them, the Prussians were then supposed to come to the aid of the duke of Wellington.

In the same report Gneisenau wrote: “[...] Am 16. Morgens versprach der Herzog Wellington, um 10 Uhr mit 20.000 Mann in Quatre Bras (Durchschnittspunkt der Strasse von Namur nach Nivelles und der von Charleroi nach Brüssel) zu sein, seine Kavallerie in Nivelles.”

This statement clearly does not refer to the meeting at Bussy. Yet, at the same time, there never was any promise from Wellington’s side which reached Namur on the morning of the 16th of June and which told the Prussian leadership that he could be at Quatre Bras with 20.000 men by 10 a.m. Let alone the fact that such a promise does not exist, for the Duke Quatre Bras – before 10 a.m. – had no relevance whatsoever.

In his letter dated 10.30 a.m. Wellington wrote: “Le corps d’armée du Prince d’Orange a une division ici et à Quatre Bras; et le reste à Nivelles. Le reserve est en marche de Waterloo sur Genappe; où elle arrivera à midi. La cavalerie Anglaise sera à la même heure à Nivelles.”

These words of Wellington, plus the hours, have been muddled up by Gneisenau in a strength of 20.000 of men at Quatre Bras by 10 a.m. Conclusive in this is that Gneisenau explicitly mentions the cavalry to be at Nivelles, and this is an element which Wellington is doing as well (but for another hour, which was noon).¹⁸

In the same report, Gneisenau wrote: “Durch noch nicht aufgeklärte Missverständnisse war General Von Bülow gestern nachmittags noch in Lüttich; sein Armeekorps noch bei und hinter Hannut. Die Konzentrierung der Wellingtonschen Armee hat auch nicht in der zugesagten Zeit stattgehabt. Vier Stunden später, als versprochen war, langte ein Teil der Reserve aus Brüssel bei Quatre Bras an, musste aber sogleich selbst ein Gefecht bestehen, das zwar ganz

glorreich für die britischen Waffen gewesen sein, aber dennoch den Rückzug des Herzogs von Wellington zur Folge gehabt haben soll. Warum das IV. Armeekorps nicht zur Schlacht gelangt und warum die Konzentrierung des Herzogs Wellington so spät erst und in so geringer Anzahl nur stattgefunden, ist beiderseits noch aufzuklären.”

Here, Gneisenau again refers to the so-called Frasnes letter, which he translates into the same time-frame of 10 a.m. as he did before. It is here, as well as in the passage before, that he points to Anglo-Netherlands-German forces at Quatre Bras and not Nivelles as the operational base for support. Gneisenau does the same in his letter to general Dobschütz in which he wrote: “Lord Wellington wollte um 10 Uhr vormittags bei Quatrebras in Bereitschaft sein, zu unserer Unterstützung zu marschieren.”

On the 17th of June, Blücher wrote to the Prussian king: “das IV. Armeekorps war noch nicht nahe genug herangekommen, worüber ich Ew. Majestät die Aktenstücke nächstens vorzulegen mir vorbehalte. Ebenso war die Armee des Herzogs von Wellington wider Vermuten und Zusage noch nicht konzentriert genug, um gleichmässig gegen den Feind mitwirken zu können; sie hat an diesem Tage nur ein unbedeutendes Gefecht geliefert, was zum Ausgange des Ganzen nur wenig beitragen konnte. [...] Das III. Armeekorps war von Sombreffe bis Balatre in der Stellung aufgestellt; das I. und II. Korps waren aber bestimmt die Gegend und Dörfer von Ligny, Saint Amand und Wagnelée zu besetzen und sobald sich günstige Umstände ereigneten, oder das IV. Armeekorps *oder Teile* [my italics] der Englischen Armee angekommen wären, zum Angriff überzugehen.” While in the first passage the whole of Wellington’s army might be meant (in an incomplete concentration around Nivelles), in the last one it is obvious that only those at Quatre Bras could be meant.

Towards Von Kleist, Gneisenau - in his report of the 17th of June - doesn’t bind his words to some kind of specific promise of Wellington by stating: “Dies ist das Resultat der Schlacht, die mit einem vollständigen Siege geendigt haben würde, wenn das 4. Armeekorps oder der Herzog von Wellington an der Schlacht Theil genommen hätten, wie solches in der Verabredung lag.” For this reason, this statement doesn’t add anything to the issue discussed here.

Another report, from Gneisenau as well, however, does. He wrote it to Von Boyen on the 25th of June 1815, and a part of it reads: “Auch Wellington kam nicht, da die so oft, und noch zuletzt am 15ten mit Bestimmtheit verheissene Konzentrirung der Britischen Armee nicht bewirkt worden war, folglich die Abrede, dass Wellington, während wir mit dem Feind uns schlugen, ihm in den Rücken gegen sollte, nicht ausgeführt werden konnte. Den Theil seiner Armee, den er zu unserer Hülfe herbeiführen wollte, griff der Feind selbst bei Quatre Bras an und hielt ihn fest.”¹⁹

It was on the 21st of June that Gneisenau wrote to Hardenberg: “Der Herzog hatte verheissen, den Feind im Rücken anzugreifen; auch er kam nicht, da seine Armee, weiss der Himmel aus welcher Ursache, sich nicht konzentrieren konnte.”²⁰ Clearly, Gneisenau speaks of Von Müffling’s letter dated 15th of June 7 p.m., but, again, without adding the conditional element in the promise and which caused the delay in the concentration as far as a support of the Prussians was concerned.

Finally, the official Prussian report as drafted at the 19th of June reads: “Nichts destoweniger entschloss sich der Feldmarschall zu schlagen, da Lord Wellington bereits eine starke Abtheilung seines Heeres, sowie alle seine bei Brüssel stehenden Reserven, ihm zur Unterstützung in Marsch gesetzt hatte, und das IVte Armeekorps erwartet wurde.” And somewhat later in describing the battle of Ligny he states: “Doch es ging die Nachricht ein, dass die *zu unserer Unterstützung bestimmte Abtheilung des Englischen Heeres* [italics are mine] selbst von einem Französischen Heere heftig angegriffen worden ist [...]”²¹

And (probably) on the 19th of June, Gneisenau wrote to count Rechberg, at Heidelberg: “Bei

den am 15. Juni erfolgte Angriff Bonapartes auf Charleroi durfte der Feld Marschall Fürst Blücher hoffen, an diesem Tage die ganze Armee in der Stellung von Sombreffe zu versammeln. Der Herzog von Wellington hatte jedoch nicht die Zeit, sich an diesem Tage mit der Armee des Fürsten Blücher zu vereinigen, und musste sich daher begnügen, an diesem Tage den wichtigen Posten von Les Quatre Bras zu vertheidigen, von welchem aus dem folgende Tage die gemeinschaftliche Offensive gegen den Feinde beginnen sollte.”²² This statement doesn't throw any light upon the meeting at Bussy; yet it shows again the principle of the trap into which Napoleon was supposed to be taken the next day in case both armies would have maintained their positions.

It was on the 21st of June that Von der Kneesebeck reported “nach der Aussage der soeben angelangenden Couriers” to the Prussian king: “Den 15. Um ½ 5 Uhr morgens wurden die Posten des 1. Preussischen Armeekorps unter Zieten an beiden Ufern der Sambre angegriffen und die Punkte von Thuin und Charleroi nach einer sehr heftigen Gegenwehr der darin gelegenen Truppen genommen. Dieser General zog sich seiner Instruktion gemäss fechtend zurück und stellte sich bei Fleurus auf. Blücher versammelte das in der Nähe liegende 2. Armeekorps bei Sombreffe. Wellington versammelte seine Truppen bei Soignies und Braine le Comte. Der Feind schickte seine Posten den Tag bis Genappe, um die Verbindung mit dem beiden Armeen zu unterbrechen. Dies veranlasste den Herzog von Wellington, seine Reserve den 16. Morgens bei Quatre Bras aufzustellen, um dadurch der Preussischen Armee sich seinerseits zu nähern, und indem er auf diese Weise den Feind nötigte, ein Teil seiner Kräfte gegen die Englische Armee zu verwenden, dem Fürsten Blücher die mögliche Hilfe zu leisten.”²³

These passages clearly mark the three stages of the way Wellington's role of support towards the Prussians evolved: from a general agreement of support as drafted long before the campaign itself (a joint battle), through the (conditional) promise of Wellington of the 15th of June which was in its turn based upon a concentration of the Anglo-Netherlands-German army around Nivelles (but which was not completed by 1 p.m. on the 16th of June, the moment the meeting at Bussy started), to the arrangement agreed upon that Wellington would bring up his forces from around Quatre Bras over the Namur road towards the Prussian army as a reserve in rear of Trois Burettes that afternoon (which support was neutralised by the French attacking Quatre Bras).²⁴

This description – in combination with the other elements as mentioned above in this chapter - is substantial for the conclusion that at Bussy it was clear for both commanders that support from around Nivelles – as it was meant to be - wasn't realistic and that this could only come from Quatre Bras and this was in itself dependent on the situation there.

After the meeting, while Blücher accompanied Wellington for some distance (²⁵), Von Müffling would have had some more talking with Gneisenau and Von Grolman in which he told them he felt most unsure whether most of the Anglo-Netherlands-German troops would be able to arrive in time at Quatre Bras; further he expected them to be attacked there – all in all, he wouldn't have believed too much that Wellington would be able to provide Blücher any assistance after all.²⁶ This may be all true, but if it is, it doesn't plea for Von Müffling as being a very serious liaison between Wellington and the Prussian general staff. Therefore, the veracity of these words is most doubtful. Shortly after, Von Müffling, accompanied by Von Nostitz for some distance (²⁷), rejoined Wellington and Blücher, who then returned to Brye. There is no information available about any arrangement between Wellington and Blücher about communication between both armies for the remainder of the day.

1. CvW. - Geschichte des Feldzuges im Jahre 1815 p.10

² Von Müffling. In: The memoirs of baron Von Müffling etc. p.230-231 and 233-237
The italics are Von Müffling's.

Major Von Weyrach, a member of the Prussian general staff, expresses himself in more or less similar terms "ehe er abritt, versprach er [Wellington] dem Marschall Blücher eine Hülfe von 20.000 Mann, - and here he cites himself "wenn er nicht selbst angegriffen werde." For that reason, Von Weyrach himself probably wasn't there at the meeting and is he citing from Von Müffling or else. In: MWB, 1861 p.343

3. Von Müffling in a letter written to general Von Hofmann. In: Hofmann, G.W.von - Zur Geschichte etc. p.133-135. This citation, however, comes from Von Pflugk Harttung. In: Die Verhandlungen etc. p.82-83

4. Dörnberg, Von. In: Pflugk Harttung, J.von - Vorgeschichte etc. p.293

Originally from the former Kriegsarchiv, nr.II.VI.E.58 According to Lehmann, who had access to the account in 1877, Von Dörnberg mentions Von Damitz, thereby dating the account from post-1837. The part as published by Von Pflugk Harttung doesn't. In: Lehmann, M. - Zur Geschichte etc.p.288

⁵ Lehmann has very strong doubts about the contribution of Von Grolmann to Von Damitz' book. He writes: "Grolman verleugnete geradezu den Verfasser, und ausserdem fand man, dass letzterer sich oft sehr eng an Wagner angeschlossen hatte." There is no indication upon which sources Lehman based this statement. In: Zur Geschichte etc. p.282

6. Damitz, K.von - Geschichte des Feldzugs etc. Vol.I p.117-118

Hofschröer interprets Damitz' words directly as Grolman's, but this cannot be fully substantiated. In: 1815.The Waterloo campaign. Wellington etc. p.237

7. Damitz, K.von - Geschichte des Feldzugs etc. p.118

The remark will be dealt with more extensively below.

⁸ In: Wagner - Pläne der Schlachten etc. IV p.29

⁹ Cf. his memorandum. In: WSD, Vol.X p.524-525

¹⁰ HL, MS61 WP 7.2.21

¹¹ NAM, nr.6507-1

Cf. Hofschröer, P. - 1815. The Waterloo campaign. Wellington etc. p.239 He cites from the Raglan papers, A 24-31

¹² Since about 11 a.m., the corps of Vandamme, Pajol and Exelmans were advancing from Fleurus and it was by 1 p.m. (the moment Wellington reached Bussy) that Gérard's corps reached Baulet, so these forces were in view from Bussy.

¹³ The conditional element is here phrased as:

“In der Absicht dies auszuführen etc.”

“Well, I will come, provided I am not attacked myself.”

“Das kann doch nur für den Fall eintreten, wenn Ich nicht selbst bei Quatre Bras angegriffen werde ? Dies wurde bejaht und Wellington stieg zu Pferde.”

¹⁴ It may very well be that Von Damitz here follows Wagner, who already wrote in 1825: “Um 1 Uhr, kurz vor dem Anfange der Schlacht, kam der Herzog von Wellington auf die Höhe der Windmühle bei Brye und hatte mit dem Feldmarschall Blücher eine Unterredung, wobei er ihm die Versicherung gab, dass in diesem Augenblick seine Armee versammelt sei, und dass er sie sogleich in Bewegung setzen werde; dagegen versprach der letztere das Gefecht in einer Stellung anzunehmen, die wenig Vortheile bot, und ersuchte den Englischen Feldherrn, seine Operationen auf den linken Flügel des Feindes zu richten. Der Entschluss in der genommenen Stellung eine Schlacht zu liefern wurde eigentlich erst jetzt ganz fest.” In: Pläne der Schlachten etc. IV p.29

¹⁵ Von Pflugk Harttung. In: GSA, VI-HA,nr.III.1.p.31-36

¹⁶ Von Pflugk Harttung also states that the role which Wellington assigned himself was one which was still linked to safeguarding the road leading to Brussels as a primary goal and that for him the connection with the Prussians came second. In this, two battles would have a mutual influence. Here, Von Pflugk Harttung fails to see the crux of the moment and that was mutual cooperation, bent upon only one thing: the utter destruction of the French army by Wellington moving in its rear and or flank, while the Prussian army would fight it in front. In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI, III.3.p.22 and in Vorgeschichte p.167, 239

¹⁷ For the full reports, see the chapter on the Prussian headquarters on the 17th of June.

¹⁸ The same element - the 20.000 men - comes back in the account of prince Von Thurn und Taxis. He says: “Der Herzog versprach, bis 3 Uhr 20.000 Mann von seiner Armee zu schicken, und nachdem man übereingekommen, dass das Gefecht angenommen werden sollte, ritt er wieder nach Quatre Bras zurück.”

From the way he describes it, it is highly improbable that Von Thurn und Taxis was present in the actual meeting, but that he heard about what was discussed.

It might be that Wellington may have mentioned a strength of about 20.000 men around Quatre Bras when he was at Bussy, but the fact that he made such an unambiguous promise as described is in my version of the events impossible. In case the duke did mention these 20.000 men, it may have also been from here that Gneisenau took it.

If this would true, Wellington may have taken the division Perponcher, the one of Picton, the Brunswickers and some cavalry into account, as he was informed about by the prince that morning. These units indeed make about 20.000 men in all.

In: Memoirs of prince Von Thurn und Taxis. In: Aus drei Feldzügen etc. p.321-322

In his turn, Von Plotho – already in 1818 – mentions these 20.000 men as having been promised by Wellington on the evening of the 15th of June, so he erroneously links this figure to the letter written by Von Müffling at 7 p.m. In: Der Krieg etc.p.35

¹⁹ In: Delbrück, H. - Das Leben etc. Vol.IV p.540

²⁰ Delbrück, H. - Das Leben etc. Vol.IV p.530
Lehmann, M. - Zur Geschichte etc. p.285

²¹ Bas, F.de & T'Serclaes de Wommersom - La campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.448

²² In: Pflugk Harttung, J. von – Archivalische Beiträge etc. p.517
Original from the Kgl. Bayerisches Kriegsarchiv, München.

²³ In: Pflugk Harttung, J.von – Vorgeschichte etc. p.168-169 (from former Kriegsarchiv VI.D.118.II)

²⁴ In the context of a joint battle planned by both allied armies, the design of the support of the Prussian army at Mont Saint Jean is in its principles highly similar to that of Wellington at Ligny. In this case – apart from the fact that Wellington was attacked himself - it meant that:
-if Napoleon would attack the Prussian centre and left wing, then Wellington would fall upon the French flank (yet, this was impossible due to the presence of the Bois Delhütte).
-if Napoleon would attack the Prussian right wing, then Wellington would give direct support in joining the Prussian front-line (this is the option the commanders chose for).
-if Napoleon would attack Wellington, then Blücher would move in the French rear and left flank (the main attack was upon Blücher).

²⁵ Nostitz, Von - Das Tagebuch etc. p.23

26. Von Müffling. In: Hofmann, G.W. - Zur Geschichte des Feldzugs von 1815 p.121-22

²⁷ Nostitz, Von - Das Tagebuch etc. p.23-24

Von Nostitz would have said to Von Müffling that he felt he had not much confidence in the success of the battle, because of the absence of Bülow and this lack of trust in Wellington's promises, but hindsight played a role in this claim, as is the case more often in Von Nostitz account.