

Calculations

This note covers some statements (in a chronological order) about calculations for the concentration of the allied armies in case of an enemy invasion into the Netherlands.

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

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

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

The second calculation is one of the most important ones, if not the most important one. It is the letter written by Von Müffling at 7 p.m. on the 15th of June in which it is stated, that Wellington would be in the vicinity of Nivelles with the whole of his army on the 16th of June unless the enemy would attack at Nivelles at the same time. Taking into account the distances and the hour at which the letter was written, it was clear to Blücher it would take Wellington most of the day to collect just a part of his army there.

The same day, general Van Reede wrote to Van Nagell: “[...] Ma dépêche en étant là j’ai eu l’occasion de voir le duc de Wellington qui m’a dit en autant de termes; je ne crois pas qu’on nous attaquera, nous sommes trop fort. J’ai appris encore que les dispositions étaient telles que dans 6 à 8 heures son armée peut au besoin être réuni; il compte rester ici de sa personne et attendre en général que les mouvements des français soient plus prononcés avant de se mouvoir.” Van Reede misunderstood what Wellington would have said as the claim done here is impossible to maintain, wherever this concentration would have taken place, even at the centre of the army.

That morning as well, baron Van der Capellen wrote to his king: “Wellington had dispositie zodanig genomen dat hij vanuit Brussel in 5 of hoogstens 6 uur op alle die punten kon zijn waar zijn aanwezigheid noodzakelijk mocht zijn.” It is highly subjective where these points would be, but on the whole this was feasible within a radius of approximately 50 kilometres.

That morning, Von Müffling had written to Gneisenau: “[...] Die Englisch-Batavische Armee ist nach beiliegender Ordre de Bataille so aufgestellt, dass die beiden Flügel Korps unter Lord Hill und Prinz von Oranien von Enghien und Braine le Comte bis Nivelles liegen und in ganz kurzer Zeit zusammgezogen werden können.[..]” Formulated this way, it is a highly uninformative document.

In August 1815, Gneisenau wrote to a friend: “Er [Wellington] hatte diese Konzentrierung zu wiederholten Malen und namentlich noch am 15ten Juni auf das bestimmteste, und zwar binnen zwölf Stunden, zugesagt, und mit uns verabredet, der Feind möge die von beiden Armeen, welche er wolle angreifen, so solle die andere ihm in den Rücken fallen. Aber der Herzog konnte sein Konzentrierung nicht zu Stande bringen, vermuthlich aus Fehlern in der Berechnung der Zeit und des Raums.”¹

The way Gneisenau cites the duke, in the sense of the calculation, the hours indicate that this could only have been a concentration of the army in its centre.

Napoleon wrote in 1820: “[...] Il fallait donc aux deux armées deux jours entiers pour se rassembler sur un même champ de bataille [...].” Having taken Quatre Bras and Fleurus as his

references for the distances given, these 24 hours fairly match the time as given by Bowles, provided Napoleon's figure refers to actual marching times, but this is not clear. ²

In 1837 Von Damitz wrote in the context of the mission of colonel Von Pful: : "Der Oberst v.Pful kam den 14ten von Brüssel zurück und überbrachte die wiederholte Versicherung, dass der Herzog v.Wellington 22 Stunden nach dem ersten Kanonenschusse seine Armee nach den eintretenden Umständen bei Quatrebras oder Nivelles concentrirt haben würde.

Der englische Feldherr wollte seine Maassregeln so getroffen haben, dass er in 6 Stunden die Meldung von den Vorposten erhalten könne, 8 Stunden die Ertheilung und Ueberbringung der Ordres erforderten, und 8 Stunden hinlänglich wären, um die Truppen auf dem Schlachtfelde vereinigt zu sehen."

As has been already demonstrated Wellington never did this promise as described by Von Damitz. At the same time, if he ever would have done so it is in absurd one in relation to the calculation of the hours as mentioned. Let alone the fact that Wellington never would act in this way right after some "first gunshot somewhere", it is the calculation itself which fails completely. As has been shown it would have taken the full army to concentrate it its left (=Nivelles / Quatre Bras) or right flank 24 hours for marching only, let alone the time needed for the alert, the issuing of orders etc.

Five years after Von Damitz, in 1842, Von Clausewitz wrote: "Die Ausdehnung dieser Armee von Mons bis aus Meer beträgt über 20 Meilen, die in der Tiefe von Tournay bis Antwerpen etwa 15. Das Hauptquartier in Brüssel liegt 10 Meilen weit von der vorderen Linie der Quartiere. Eine solche Armee kann in ihrem Mittelpunkt nicht unter 4 bis 5 Tagen versammelt werden." ³ It is here that Von Clausewitz assigns Wellington's army an incorrect area of cantonments as his mobile army did not stretch towards the places as he describes it. It did – roughly- between the Scheldt river, Ghent, Brussels, the road leading from Brussels to Charleroi, Binche and Tournai, thereby covering a much smaller surface of about 5600 square kilometres (instead of 16.800).

At the same time, there where Von Clausewitz does take the army as it was cantoned into account, combined with the fact that not the whole army could be collected at a specific point he is moving towards the reference of Bowles much more. In fact, he states that Wellington could assemble half or two thirds of his army (the reserve plus either the 1st or 2nd corps) on one of his flanks or the centre of his army in one to two days. ⁴

In his memoirs of 1844 Von Müffling wrote: "der Herzog von Wellington, durch mich unterrichtet, dass die Espionage des Fürsten Blüchers schlecht organisirt war, glaubte sich auf diesem Punkt sehr sicher, und dass er alles sofort erfahren würde, was in Paris auf einen Marsch gegen die Niederlande deute – in dieser Zuversicht war die Dislocation der englisch-niederländisch-hannoverschen Armee angelegt, und die Stunde berechnet, in welcher Sie – vom Augenblick der Absendung der Cavalerie-Ordonnanzen aus Brüssel auf dem einen oder auf dem andern der drei verschiedenen Rendezvous versammelt sein konnte.

Die Rechnungen selbst waren mir nicht bekannt, sie waren jedoch, wie es sich später auswies, in der Voraussetzung geführt dass die Befehle zur Zusammenziehung am Tage, und nicht in der Nacht gegeben und ausgeführt wurden. Nur zu oft kommt bei den Berechnungen dieses Versehen vor. In dunkler Nacht können die Ordonnanzen auf Nebenwegen nicht scharf reiten, sie finden in den Cantonnierungen Alles in tiefem Schlaf und eine Verspätung der Ankunft auf dem Rendezvous ist die unabwendbare Folge einer auf die Zeit des Tages und nicht der Nacht gegründeten Berechnung." ⁵

It is unfortunate that Von Müffling doesn't name the three rendez-vous by name and that he claims he was not aware of the calculations as designed by Wellington, but at the same time his statements only confirm that, supposing he is speaking the truth, that they were drafted in more or less ideal circumstances, that is at least during daytime. This corresponds to a certain

extent to Bowles' statement. Yet, this element is an additional one to the actual calculations of which it is hard to imagine that Von Müffling was not aware of them.

In the same publication, Von Müffling cites the duke of Wellington as having said to him on the 15th of June: "If all is as general Von Zieten supposes, I will concentrate on my left wing, i.e. the corps of the prince of Orange; I shall then be *à portée* to fight in conjunction with the Prussian army[...]" ⁶ The italics used do not denote any specific significance as all French expressions in the memoirs have been printed this way, but in this case the expression is the key in the passage as cited.

The expression meaning "within reach" is not defined, and at the same time has a highly subjective connotation, as this all depended upon the circumstances of the moment. In that sense, it does not help us any further what calculations formed the basis of the expression used here.

In the same year it was William Siborne who wrote about Wellington's army: "from whatever point offensive operations might be directed against that portion of the Belgian frontier occupied by the army under Wellington, the duke, by advancing to the threatened point with his reserve and placing the remainder of his troops in movement had it in its power to concentrate at least two thirds of his intended disposable force for the field, upon the line of enemy's operations, within 22 hours after the receipt of intelligence of the actual direction and apparent object of those operations.[...] the main points of interior concentration were Audenarde, Grammont, Ath, Enghien, Soignies, Nivelles and Quatre Bras." ⁷

Though Siborne is not specific on the points where Wellington could confront the French, his statements make more of a distinction when it comes down to the time needed to get a proper alarm of the situation, the direction of the enemy and the resulting actual time needed for moving the forces. Additionally, he doesn't bind his calculation to the army as a whole but to two thirds of it. Yet, his calculation is still tight. Also, his description of the main points of interior concentration is confusing: on the one hand it seems to have been set upon those places where divisional headquarters were located, while at the same time not all divisions are covered; on the other hand, there is no evidence whatsoever that Wellington had actually indicated these places as points of interior concentration.

In 1857, Charras wrote: "Attaqué par sa [Wellington's] droite, attaqué par sa gauche, il lui fallait un jour de marche forcée pour concentrer la moitié environ de son armée sur l'une ou l'autre aile, et deux jours pour l'y réunir tout entière." ⁸

For the Prussian army, the general report dated 19th of June states: "Die Konzentrationspunkte der vier Preussischen Armeekorps waren Fleurus, Namur, Cinay und Hannut, und so gelegen, dass die Armee auf einem dieser Punkte in 24 Stunden versammelt sein konnte." ⁹ Taking these 24 hours and the distances involved, what is meant here is the concentration of the army as such. In this sense it resembles the reference as given by Bowles (see above).

When it came down to the concentration of the 3rd corps, colonel Henry Hardinge made a realistic calculation in writing on the 14th of June: "In case of necessity the 3rd corps from the environs of Cinay can be assembled at this point in fourteen hours [...]"

Von Damitz, in 1837, however, didn't do so for the Prussian army in general. Using the concentration of the army near Sombreffe as a starting point, he writes: "Die Armee-Corps waren demnach so dislocirt, dass die entferntesten Brigaden höchstens 3 Meilen bis zum Sammelplatz ihrer Corps hatten. Wenn man 6 Stunden zur Ausfertigung und Überbringung der Befehle rechnet, so konnten demnach in 12 Stunden die Armee-Corps versammelt sein, und zwar das erste Corps bei Fleurus, das zweite bei Namur, das dritte bei Cinay und das vierte nach den eintretenden Verhältnissen auf dem rechten oder linken Ufer der Maas.

Es war jedoch gar nicht einmal nothwendig, dass die einzelnen Corps sich auf ihren Sammelplätzen vereinigten, sondern nur dasjenige Corps, welches angegriffen wurde, musste

sich konzentrieren, die übrigen Truppen marschierten den nächsten Weg nach dem Sammelplatz der Armee.

Für den Fall, dass die Armee sich also bei Sombref konzentrieren sollte, musste der feindliche Angriff das erste Armee-Corps treffen, welches sich allmählich gegen Fleurus zurückzog, und von hier aus noch eine Meile bis Sombref zu marschieren hatte.

Das zweite Armee-Corps durfte von Namur bis Sombref nur 2 ½ Meile zurücklegen. Das dritte Armee-Corps würde für diesen Fall schon seine detaschierte 11te Brigade herangezogen haben, und dann von Cinay 5 ½ Meile, so wie das vierte Armee-Corps, welches bis Hannut heranzuziehen war, nur 4 ½ Meile bis Sombref zu marschieren gehabt haben.

In 10 höchstens 12 Stunden konnten also die entferntesten Armee-Corps, vom Augenblick ihres Abmarsches an gerechnet, bei Sombref eintreten, und wenn man 6 Stunden für das Eingeben der Meldungen der Vorposten rechnet, so wie 6 Stunden für die Ausfertigung und Überbringung der Befehle annimmt, so was er möglich, die Armee in 24 Stunden auf dem entferntesten Konzentrierungs-Punkte bei Sombref zu vereinigen.”¹⁰

As a first observation, not all brigades were located within the 23 kilometres of the corps assembly point as Von Damitz claims to be.

Secondly, Von Damitz' calculations contain an inner contradiction. While on the one hand he sees no necessity for those corps which were not under attack to concentrate first on their assembly point before their actual march towards that of the army, in his calculations he *does have* these corps march off to these points (Fleurus, Namur, Ciney and Hannut). In this way, the calculation is not complete as it skips the concentration of the corps on these points while they have to be taken into account on that type of calculation. Other than that, there is no chance that for instance the 4th corps could cover the distance between Hannut and Sombref (which is about 45 kilometres) in 10 to 12 hours.

For Von Clausewitz “Blücher croyait pouvoir rassembler son armée près de Sombref en trente-six heures.” For the 3rd corps he calculates a time needed of 36 hours as coming from Ciney, while for the 2nd he gives 12 hours as coming from Namur. So, this means that the statement on Blücher's presumptions was one as starting from the moment the army-corps were concentrated on their assembly-points.

William Siborne wrote on the subject: “The points of concentration for the corps were Fleurus, Namur, Ciney and Liège. Each corps could be collected at its own headquarters within 12 hours, and it was fully practicable to form a junction of the whole army at any of those points within 24 hours.”¹¹ In relation to the distances involved, these figures should be seen as ones for marching, no other.

The calculation as given by Siborne demonstrates that figures given in this context should be handled with care, in the sense that they often are not well described in what they do and what they don't incorporate. In this, sometimes also subjectivity plays a role, in the sense that they are represented in such a way as to be of some use in one way or another. As such, they are often fairly meaningless.

¹ Cf. the letter to his friend Alexander Gibsone, consul in Danzig, dated 6th August 1815. In: Delbrück, H. - Einiges zum Feldzuge von 1815 p.659

² Mémoires pour servir etc. p.77

³ In: Hinterlassene Werke etc. p.21
A “Meile” is the German mile, which is 7.5 kilometres.

⁴ In: Campagne de 1815 en France p.35-36

⁵ The memoirs of baron Von Müffling etc. p.232-233

⁶ The memoirs of baron Von Müffling etc. p.229 In hindsight, this expression would mean a distance of about 20 kilometres (Nivelles – Sombreffe).

⁷ History of the war etc. Vol.I p.34-35

⁸ Histoire de la campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.80

⁹ In: Bas, F.de & T'Serclaes de Wommersom, J.de - La campagne de 1815 etc. Vol.III p.444

¹⁰ Geschichte des Feldzugs etc. p.52-53

¹¹ History of the war etc. Vol.I p.39