

## “Les petits Cent jours” - Louis XVIII at Ghent.

While the duke of Orléans left for England, many accompanied Louis XVIII in exile. Among them were amongst many others the count of Artois, the duke de Berry, the loyal marshals Victor and Marmont, the duke de Feltre (minister of war), count Jaucourt (minister of foreign affairs), the duke de Blacas (minister in charge of the royal household) and the marquis de Lally-Tollendal, *ministre d'état*.

Sir Charles Stuart, baron Vincent, general Fagel, baron Goltz and general count Pozzo di Borgo retook their positions as diplomats, representing Great Britain, Austria, the Netherlands, Prussia and Russia respectively.

Unlike his former emigration from France, in 1815 Louis XVIII was still the legitimate king of France and in order to stress and maintain this idea, he soon re-established in Ghent the routines and *étiquette* of the royal court as they had been before. He also issued decrees and even an official newspaper (as counterpart for the imperial *Moniteur*), the *Journal universel* was published. It contained foreign treaties, court bulletins, government declarations, polemics, news from France etc.<sup>1</sup>

Though many of his entourage barely had anything to do, there was a lively correspondence with statesmen, ambassadors and other diplomats abroad. One of them was Fouché who kept the king and his brother informed about the events in France. At the same time, visitors from France and other countries payed their respects to the king by bringing up all sorts of proposals and projects for the further support of his return to France.



The duke De Berry (1778-1820)

For all of the king's entourage it was clear that the Bourbons would have to be restored as soon as Napoleon would have been over and done with. Yet, within this idea, there was no agreement amongst those in exile in what way. On the one hand, there were the traditionalists, centred around the duke of Artois, who were in favour of a rigid restauration to the *ancien régime*. On the other, there were those who supported a more liberal interpretation of the monarchy as it had been before.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, Willem, the king of the Netherlands, had granted Louis and his entourage exile in his country and therefore his security was taken very serious. Yet, at the same time, due to the autonomy in which the French king acted, frictions and mistrust arose between his court and the government of the Netherlands. Having his own extensive network in France, this

government feared an open provocation of Napoleon which could be a threat to the newly established kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

Things were further complicated by the fact that the royal court had access to a wealth of information about the military strength of Napoleon, as a result of which it formed its own ideas about ways to get rid of the French emperor.<sup>4</sup> These ideas mainly focused upon a swift invasion of France and a role of the king, his court and his small army in the overtaking of *places fortes*, particularly in the north of France.

These ambitions, however, did not fall into fertile ground to the allies at all. In fact, though Louis XVIII was obviously recognized by the allies as the legitimate king of France, he was neither regarded as an ally, nor as a belligerent and was accordingly treated that way.<sup>5</sup> As for Wellington, though he was willing to support the king with military means to some extent, he also regarded his ambitions as too self-indulgent and as a jammer in the grand military operations which were about to start.<sup>6</sup>

The moment hostilities did start, by the 15<sup>th</sup> of June, the nerves of the court in exile were put to the test.

The royal troops, led by the duke de Berry, were in cantonments in and around Alost, Ninove, Moerzeke and Dendermonde. By the beginning of April they had counted about 800 men; by June the number had increased to about 2000., but they were in a miserable state due to a lack of equipment, uniforms, fidelity and training.<sup>7</sup> It was possibly around 1 a.m. that the duke de Berry in his headquarters at Alost received Wellington's letter (timed 9.30 p.m. 15<sup>th</sup> of June) informing him of the French attack upon Blücher and requesting him to concentrate his forces at Alost.

That night, at Ghent, the duke de Feltre received a similar note of the duke (timed 10 p.m. 15<sup>th</sup> of June), while at the same time he requested him to prepare for a possible departure from the city.<sup>8</sup>

Immediately after, De Feltre informed De Berry at Alost and the Netherlands ambassador Robert Fagel about what he had learned.<sup>9</sup>

Further information about the military developments, at least from Wellington himself, did not drop in until the 18<sup>th</sup> of June. Until then, the situation was fully dependent upon other bits of information which could help to clarify what was going on. And this is what happened by confusing rumours dropping in at Ghent about serious reversal of the allied armies.<sup>10</sup> This was fed by the sudden departure of the British brigade of major-general Lambert from Ghent for Assche on the early that morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> of June. But it were not only these men who left the city: meanwhile many civilians had prepared themselves for departure while hundreds of others had already started leaving the city that day. Of its garrison, composed of newly raised militia battalions, some units even panicked and left the city altogether as well. The majority of all of these people fled to Antwerp, where the confusion near the crossings of the Scheldt was complete.<sup>11</sup>

At Alost, upon the news coming from Wellington and the duke de Feltre, the duke de Berry had instructed his chief of staff, count De Trogoff, to concentrate his forces at Alost; he also requested the military governor of the place, lieutenant-colonel Vermeulen, to provide for sufficient lodgings for his men. In addition, a town guard was organised and patrols were installed at the main gates of Alost. By 6 a.m. the duke de Berry also wrote to his father, the count d'Artois. In this letter he advised him to leave Ghent at once; this retreat of the royal court would then be covered by the royal forces in a position near Termonde. Triggered by all sorts of rumours, they left Alost in haste for Dendermonde that day.<sup>12</sup>

Louis XVIII kept his composure though and urged his entourage to stay calm as long as no official news from Wellington had dropped in.

Hours and hours passed in uncertainty well into the 17<sup>th</sup> of June, at which date the count of Artois brought news from Brussels that Napoleon was about to enter the capital. As a result, anxiety turned into sheer panic. In the uproar, Louis XVII still kept his calm, but allowed for preparations for the departure of his court.

It was in this situation of desperation that probably by 9 a.m. on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June that a second letter from Wellington (timed 3 a.m.) reached the duke de Berry at Alost. It informed him about the development of the campaign and about the possibility that Napoleon might turn him through Halle so as to take Brussels. If this would be the case, the court would immediately have to be transferred to Antwerp along the left bank of the river Scheldt and through the fortress called *tête de Flandres*.

The duke de Berry was supposed to inform the duke de Feltre and it can be assumed that this news reached Ghent by 2 p.m. By now, the duke de Feltre had urged Fagel to request the military and civilian authorities at Antwerp to prepare a number of transports from Ghent and to have sufficient ferries available at the *tête de Flandres* to cross the Scheldt river.<sup>13</sup> The same day, all the valuables of the royal court were transferred to Antwerp, while under the supervision of the town commander, major-general Martuschewitz, the gates of Ghent were closed, fortifications improved and inundations prepared.<sup>14</sup>

Eventually, it was towards daybreak of the 19<sup>th</sup> of June that a messenger brought the breaking news of the French defeat at Waterloo.<sup>15</sup> A letter from Pozzo di Borgo to the king of France, delivered by midday on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June underlined the scope of the victory. He wrote: “Le duc de Wellington, que j’ai quitté à minuit m’a chargé d’informer Votre Majesté des événements de la journée d’hier. Sa Seigneurie a gagné la bataille la plus complète, la plus contestée, la plus glorieuse et peut-être la plus conséquente de l’histoire. Le rival et les ennemis de la France ont été vaincus après neuf heures de combat. Le duc s’est surpassé en héroïsme, et la science militaire n’a jamais été mise à une plus grande épreuve. L’ennemi est en pleine déroute, il a perdu son artillerie et perdu aujourd’hui les restes de son armée dispersée. J’aurai l’honneur de soumettre à Votre Majesté les détails de cette mémorable journée, et je la supplie, en attendant, de vouloir bien agréer mes félicitations et mon profond respect.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Muilwijk, E. – 1815. From mobilisation to war p.21-25

In all, 20 newspapers were printed between the 14<sup>th</sup> of April and the 21<sup>st</sup> of June. Cf. Haesaert, J.P. – Louis XVIII à Gand en 1815 p.532

<sup>2</sup> Houssaye, H. – 1815. La première restauration p.478

Capefigue, M. - Les cent jours Vol.II p.36, 39

<sup>3</sup> Muilwijk, E. – 1815. From mobilisation to war p.21-25

Fleischman, Th – Le roi de Gand p.143

<sup>4</sup> Cf. reports of the duke de Feltre to Wellington, dated 14<sup>th</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of April, 30<sup>th</sup> of May and 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of June 1815. In: WSD, Vol.X p.76-78, 152-155, 166-167, 391-392, 417-418, 449-451

<sup>5</sup> Houssaye, H. – 1815. La première restauration p.475-482

Fleischman, Th – Le roi de Gand p.141

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Wellington to the dukes of Berry, Blacas and Feltre in letters dated 9<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of May and 14<sup>th</sup> of June. In: WD, Vol.XII p.365, 392, 405, 463

<sup>7</sup> Haesaert, J.P. – Louis XVIII à Gand en 1815 p.526

Fleischman, Th – Le roi de Gand p.84

<sup>8</sup> On the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, the *Journal universel*, at Ghent, published the following note: “Le Roi de France a reçu cette nuit, du quartier général anglais, la nouvelle du commencement des hostilités. Cette première rencontre a eu lieu à Lobbes, près de Charleroi, et les alliées avaient aussitôt concentré leurs forces.” In: Fleischman, Th – Le roi de Gand p.157

<sup>9</sup> Fagel in his turn, informed the minister of foreign affairs in The Hague, baron Nagell van Ampsen the same day about the French invasion and about Wellington assembling his forces at 3 a.m. for a concentration around Nivelles.

Cf. Muilwijk, E. – Quatre Bras. Perponcher’s gamble p.142

The letter involved is in the NA, 2.0.5.47, inv.40

<sup>10</sup> Muilwijk, E. – Quatre Bras. Perponcher’s gamble p.142

Rochechouart, L.V.L. – Souvenirs sur la révolution, l’empire et la restauration

<sup>11</sup> Muilwijk, E. – Quatre Bras. Perponcher’s gamble p.142-143

He cites from the recollections of 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant Swaving of the 23<sup>rd</sup> battalion of national militia.

<sup>12</sup> Muilwijk, E. – Quatre Bras. Perponcher’s gamble p.143-144

<sup>13</sup> Muilwijk, E. – Quatre Bras. Perponcher’s gamble p.144

He cites from a letter from Fagel dated 18<sup>th</sup> of June. In: NA, nr.2.05.47 inv.40

<sup>14</sup> Haesaert, J.P. – Louis XVIII à Gand en 1815 p.533

Fleischman, Th. – Le roi de Gand p.158-159

<sup>15</sup> Fleischman, Th – Le roi de Gand p.161

He speaks of 2 a.m. but this is impossible in relation to the distances involved. Some relate this message to the letter mentioned of Pozzo di Borgo, but this one was timed at 5 a.m.

Cf. Haesaert, J.P. – Louis XVIII à Gand en 1815 p.533

Chateaubriand – Mémoires d’outre tombe p.502

<sup>16</sup> In: Romberg, E. & A. Malet (ed.) - Louis XVIII et les Cent Jours à Gand p.220

Striking detail in the letter is the leaving out of the Prussian share in the victory altogether.