

The operations of the 1st corps.

The alarm-system. ¹

An essential element in the alarm-system of the Prussian army were alarm-gunshots. The guns which could do so stood far away from the frontline, in Fontaine l'Evêque and in Mont-sur-Marchienne. In the current situation, messages about the French offensive could come from Gerpennes, Thuin or Nalinnes. That would take about one hour, half an hour and about three quarters of an hour respectively. But of course there was the risk that riders were not sent out at all, as nobody wanted to cause a false alarm.

The commanders of the two artillery units for alarm had an obvious responsibility not to fire an unnecessary alarm as well; this caused uncertainty and a double check in what was actually happening.

In this particular case, as soon as Zieten had heard the gunfire from the Sambre he had ordered to have the alarm-guns to be fired, but this did not take place right away. It was only after the personal intervention of colonel Von Reiche at Mont-sur-Marchienne that they did. ² By then it may have been 5.30 a.m. ³

And there was also the risk that people would not recognize the shots as alarm-shots, as the Prussian artillery had regular practices. It might have been better to have them accompanied by smoke-signals.

And there was another gap in the preparations as far as alarming was concerned: now the posts waited for the alarm or for an order; if this did not arrive it could be presumed that there was no real direct danger. But this had the disadvantage that things were reported too late. It would have been better if brigade-commanders or commanders of outposts had received the instruction to act according to their own idea in case the situation seemed to be dangerous. If there would have been such an instruction, Von Steinmetz could have had his battalions or regiments assemble in their rendez-vous. The outposts could then have been relieved by cavalry.

Intelligence also had its deficiencies, not only between brigades but also from brigades through corps-headquarters towards general headquarters.

Von Steinmetz brigade. ⁴

Though the French offensive started by 4 a.m., it was only six hours later that the majority of the brigade of Von Steinmetz was concentrated.

One of the main reasons for this was the fact that the alarm-shots of the Prussian artillery could not be heard in most of the frontline of the 1st brigade, due to the wind which came from the west. For that reason, troops had to be informed by riders and this all took time. Another circumstance was, as there was no French attack from the front, that the outposts which were far in front, had to be collected from the rear.

What made the situation even worse was that the units of the 1st regiment Westphalian Landwehr had been spread out far out in front.

In his situation, Von Steinmetz knew very little of what was happening and it was not really clear whether he was allowed to fall back without being attacked without orders of Zieten; he may have expected them, but didn't get them. Yet he did decide to evacuate his positions and to withdraw on Fontaine l'Evêque.

By doing so, it appeared later that he had actually for the most part complied with Zieten's instructions (dated 8 a.m.), by the time he received them (which must have been somewhere between 9 and 10 a.m.).

Yet, his decision to give up his front-position was a bit late in relation to the French advance and therefore a regular assembling of his brigade was impossible. Further, the units which came from Binche could no longer use the road Binche-Anderklues-Fontaine l'Evêque because of a risk of a French offensive from the south, and therefore they now took a more northern route through Mont Saint Aldegonde, which took more time and which prevented a full concentration of the brigade at Fontaine l'Evêque.

By the time Von Steinmetz received the instruction to fall back in line with the brigade of Pirch II, the 2nd French corps was already heading from Montignies-le-Tilleul to Marchienne-au-Pont.

Realising the danger, and even though his brigade had not been fully collected, Von Steinmetz started to move further east, although his vanguard had to wait for his rearguard which was still on the other side of Fontaine l'Evêque.

In the disposition of the 2nd of May, Pirch II was instructed to maintain the positions of Marchienne-au-Pont, Charleroi and Châtelet as long as the 1st brigade had not reached this line during its retreat.

The lack of concentration in Von Steinmetz column would not have been a problem as long as Pirch II kept Marchienne-au-Pont according to the instructions, but he didn't: by 11 a.m. he evacuated it, while Von Steinmetz still had his units stretched out as far as west of Fontaine l'Evêque.⁵

Other than that, other measures taken for the security of the 1st brigade had not been sufficient as well: at Gosselies there was one regiment of cavalry plus a battalion of the 3rd brigade. Two other battalions secured the space between Gosselies and Fleurus and the Piéton-stream was covered by a battalion of the 2nd brigade, but as soon as this battalion left its position, the southern part of the Piéton and of the Brussels road were open for the enemy.

It was only because of the slow French advance north of the Sambre that Von Steinmetz made his way through towards Courcelles.

Due to the fact that Von Steinmetz still did not have his brigade completely concentrated and due to his uncertainty about the strength of the enemy at or in front of Gosselies (where he was supposed to go according to the disposition dated 2nd of May), Von Steinmetz took up a temporary position in rear of the Piéton near La Motte, fronting east.⁶

As soon as he had enough of his units available and understanding that the French were not in force yet in front of Gosselies, he decided to go there and to intervene into the action which was taking place. The result was that the French yielded, but Von Steinmetz did not give up his position right away, even though the connection with the rest of the 1st corps was vital.

The first reason for Von Steinmetz to do so was a plain one: as the French didn't advance in force, he followed the instructions of Zieten's order of 8 a.m. that morning and the disposition of the 2nd May which basically ordered the brigade to take up a position north of Gosselies.

The other reason for Von Steinmetz to halt north of Gosselies was to let his most rearward units come up, like the Westphalians and captain Von Gillhausen with his 2nd battalion 1st Westphalian Landwehr, who had exceeded his mission to cover towards Jumet the march of the brigade from Courcelles to Gosselies.

As soon as Von Steinmetz had pulled in his units and saw that the French came up in force, he led his brigade away before an actual confrontation ensued. He pulled further east behind a wide screen of infantry which pushed back the French. Initially, the French were too weak to operate against Von Steinmetz' left flank through Ransart, but the moment they were reinforced, he was ordered to take up a position near Heppignies till dusk. Von Steinmetz did so; the French yet attacked from the south but the attempt was so weak that they were easily repulsed.

The Prussian resistance south of and along the Sambre; the operations of the 2nd brigade.⁷

In the confrontation with the French columns it became clear that the position of Pirch II in particular was one for observation, not for action: the space in front was very large and the two battalions which were in front were too far away from each other. Further they were insufficiently supported by cavalry and too far away from their supports. As an extra problem both were not the most suitable battalions for their task, due to their lack of experience and discipline.

For that reason the garrison at Thuin immediately got involved in a strong action without being properly supported and the cavalry which came to its support was not enough. Von Monsterberg would have been able to save his men by falling back to the left bank of the Sambre, but for some reason he did not do so.

The other battalion, the 3rd of the 28th regiment, could get away by an initial order to fall back through Louverval and Marcinelle towards Charleroi. However, this order did not take into account whether this was possible at all. The situation was being aggravated as a second order prescribed the battalion only to march off in case it would be faced by a superior enemy or when it would actually get the order to do so. This finally came by 8.30 a.m., but by then the French had approached Charleroi and the battalion ran the risk of falling straight into French hands. By sheer luck the majority of it came away through Châtelet, but one company – which stood further to the west - was intercepted by French cavalry and destroyed. The company could have been pulled to the battalion the moment the situation became clear, but this was not carried out.

Pirch II had the ambiguous task of slowing down the enemy's advance, but at the same time not to let himself into serious confrontations. From this, the sacrificing of the two battalions in front can possibly be explained.

Zieten's role.⁸

In the way the situation developed it was the 2nd brigade which had the task of giving the 1st corps, and with that the army, the opportunity to concentrate near Sombreffe.

That it did not fully succeed in this had to do with the fact that the three passages over the Sambre, at Marchienne-au-Pont, Charleroi and Châtelet, were evacuated quickly and after only a slight resistance. And this has probably been ordered by Zieten himself.

By 8 a.m. Zieten was still resolved to offer strong resistance at those points, but by 10 a.m. he had changed his mind: units were no supposed to give serious resistance at the Sambre and this approach was probably due to the avoidance of any serious actions and to the swift French advance. Somehow, Zieten must have felt very uneasy about the situation, as by leaving the position of the Sambre he would have his 1st brigade running the risk of being isolated or even destroyed, while the 4th brigade could be scattered even before it would reach the river.

He must have been influenced by the sudden (and also incorrect) news he got: the loss of Thuin, the French presence near Montigny-le-Tilleul and the fact that the enemy would advance over the left bank of the Sambre as well.

Now, Zieten gave up his sole, natural and for a short defence his best defence-line, the Sambre-river, and thereby allowed Napoleon to cross it and to deploy his army on the left bank.

The alternative would have been to transfer the current observation-position into a fighting one, at this natural defence-line.

After the news of the strong French presence in front during the evening of the 14th of June, Zieten should have pulled in all his foremost units and draw them onto the Sambre to strengthen a defence line here.

The cavalry should then not have been used so much for fighting but for long-range observations on the French whereabouts and movements. However, the problem was that the 1st corps did not have so much cavalry as most of the regiments were weak in strength. While the reserve-cavalry with the 1st and 2nd brigade was insufficient, the cavalry-reserve was too far away to be of any use anyway; it stood near Gosselies and Fleurus. The Brandenburg dragoons were at some point of time assigned to Pirch II, but by then it was too late.

Most of the cavalry was placed in rear of the infantry, while it should have been in front.⁹

On top of that, no real measures were taken for a strong defence of the passages: bridges were not barricaded and no arrangements were taken for the destruction of them.¹⁰ This may all have had political reasons (towards the local inhabitants), but it made a defence much more difficult. Fords were not occupied either. All this would have taken the whole brigade to defend the river-position, but to establish the defence-line here was important enough. That Zieten didn't do so is a serious issue; it could have had grave consequences and that these did not occur was not so much due to Zieten only, but also to the lack of French progress: the advantage could not be fully exploited as the foremost French units had to wait for infantry-supports.

All in all, Zieten could have been able to withstand the French at the Sambre for a few hours without real danger. And this gain of time was particularly vital as the concentration of the Prussian army in the position of Sombreffe was already done on a very tight schedule, one in which also Zieten had to act. He succeeded, but that was not only his credit but also a result of problems on the French side.

The fact that Zieten also did not use the Sambre as a defence-line may have had to do with the spirit in which the disposition of the 2nd of May was written: all hopes were put upon positions at Gilly and Fleurus to slow down the French advance, not on the Sambre. And if there would be a defence along the river, it was not an independent one, but always one which was related to the positions of Gilly and Fleurus.

The only place in the disposition where this is being more or less proposed is in the case that the French would advance through Philippeville only: in that case the 4th brigade was supposed to hold the Sambre as long as possible, to make sure that the 1st corps could concentrate further to the rear.

The still rather sudden decision to leave the Sambre was Zieten's as by 10.30 a.m., the moment he ordered the evacuation of Marchienne-au-Pont, he didn't have any instructions of general headquarters at all. By the way, the moment they came by 11 a.m., they contained nothing in this sense.

In the concentration of the corps as a whole, each brigade was too much on its own; each one of them had to cope with the problems it faced, according to the circumstances it was in without a real cooperation.

Had there been a better communication between the brigades, the 1st and 4th brigade for instance would have know earlier about the hostilities and could made their arrangements for departure.

There was the planned cooperation between the 1st and the 2nd brigade, but one between the 2nd and the 3rd would also have been logical.¹¹

And yet, with all the problems, errors and lack of suitable preparations, Zieten had by the end of the day succeeded in concentrating his corps without too much losses, in front of a strong enemy and from a position which was very wide and unfit for defence – thereby forming the shield for the concentration of the rest of the army until then. ¹²

The Prussian operations north of the Sambre; the actions of Gosselies and Gilly. ¹³

To slow down the enemy and thereby to make the concentration possible of the 1st corps in general and the 3rd and 4th brigades in particular, but with the instruction not to engage a serious confrontation, Pirch II took up a defensive position near Gilly.

The position was a favourable one as it dominated the defiles of Charleroi and Châtelet. Additionally, the woods with their numerous roads facilitated a possible retreat.

A prolonged resistance here was, however, not possible as the Prussian frontline was too extended for the numbers of units involved. ¹⁴ Furthermore, its right flank wasn't covered and its left flank was prone to be outflanked.

And the right flank was a pretty strong anxiety of Pirch II, as can be read from his report dated 5 p.m. He had hoped Von Steinmetz would cover this flank by occupying Ransart which was too far out for him as he had no more troops left to occupy it. But it also was for Von Steinmetz. The result was that Ransart wasn't occupied at all while the village formed the hinge of the positions of both brigades as long as they stood near Gilly and Gosselies. ¹⁵ There is not strong proof for it, but it can be presumed that French were at Ransart or in its surroundings the moment the action near Gilly took place. ¹⁶

But for Pirch II it was not a possible French presence at Ransart which triggered him to break off the action prematurely: it was the combination of his thin line on a wide front and the superiority of the French forces; yet, the situation could have been even more dangerous had the French had a strong superiority in all arms much earlier that afternoon, but this was not the case. ¹⁷

Now, the French delay permitted the Prussians not only to concentrate their troops further in rear of Fleurus, but also to form a second line in rear of the woods which was ready to receive the units of Pirch II.

The French offensive was as simple as effective: while artillery and infantry pinned Pirch II in front, his left flank would be turned by cavalry. ¹⁸ Yet, in the middle of the action Pirch II broke it off and pulled back through the wood towards Lambusart.

However, as there was only very few cavalry available (only the regiment of West-Prussian dragoons, which had suffered already), the task of giving cover got down to two infantry-battalions, of which one had already suffered before: the fuselier-battalions of the 28th regiment and of the 1st regiment of West-Prussian infantry nr.6. It was by the resistance of these two battalions, and then the last one in particular, that Pirch II could pull out behind the wood.

In the way the action was handled it would have been better to have more cavalry in front of the wood as behind it, where it now stood without any purpose. Other than that, as there was no real intention to fight, it would have been far more efficient and protective as well if the infantry battalions would have been more close to the wood: now some of them had to cover a large distance before being able to reach it and that was dangerous especially in view of the presence of a strong French cavalry and artillery.

Now, Pirch II managed to fall back on a second position in rear of the wood in the vicinity of Lambusart. All in all, he had fulfilled a difficult task, but he had carried it out quite well, even though he faced losses and made some erroneous arrangements.

The 3rd brigade suffered, just as the 1st and the 2nd did, from its scattered cantonments. Part of it was in and around Fleurus, another at the Sambre and another near Gosselies. Apart from that, there was no close cooperation between the 2nd brigade and that part of the 3rd brigade which was on the Sambre, especially during the halt at Gilly. The result could have been an integrated position on the left of Pirch's position; now the unit of major Von Stuckradt was only able to cover the retreat of Pirch II towards Lambusart, and that was not because of the the Prussian cooperation but simply because of the fact that the French didn't push through between both brigades. If the French would have been bolder, Von Stuckradt would have been cut off.¹⁹

Although it was not attacked, it took the 4th brigade, with its scattered units, the whole day to collect near Fleurus; the main cause for this delay should be sought in the fact that it was believed that the passages over the Sambre should be covered as long as possible.²⁰ It is also somewhat surprising that this brigade did not come to the aid of the 2nd brigade.²¹

Von Röder was supposed to cover the retreat of Pirch II and he did, but he could have done much more. Now only the Brandenburg dragoons came in action, but they alone were too weak. He could have run over the French advance guard and take the French guns; it would not have had that much military effect, but it would have benefited the moral. Now, the cavalry was kept in the rear too much and if it was used it was only done so for secondary purposes and in an uncertain way. As a general arm, its use wasn't fully exploited as it should have been, as a screen to cover a retreat and to repulse the enemy.²²

A striking feature of the position for the night of the 15th is the concern for the extreme left flank and that should be explained by the fear of being turned by that side, so that the enemy could separate the 1st corps of the rest of the army.

This, while the right flank was open and practically uncovered; here only a patrol of one officer and 40 men were in observation.²³

The concentration of the army in the position of Sombreffe.

Sometimes it is suggested as if the concentration in the vicinity of Sombreffe was a main focus for the Prussians and as if everything was set to get there as soon as possible for an imminent battle right away. In this, it more or less resembles the suggestion on the French side as if Napoleon planned it all on the 15th and 16th of June in such a way so as to be ready for the battle at Ligny.

And even if the Prussians would have aimed for such a battle right from the beginning, it was not only in their hands: it was still a open question whether Napoleon would be aiming for a confrontation there as well.

As far as the Prussian army is concerned, this suggestion is only a part of the whole picture.

Of course, the position of Sombreffe was the key element in the concentration of the Prussian army, but this was not for a possible battle only and the concentration there as such was not designed in a straight way.

In taking a closer look to this concentration it becomes clear that it was set in carefully planned stages.

It was in the evening of the 14th of June, having no hostilities yet at hand, that preparatory measures were taken for a possible later concentration of the army.

Later, around midnight in the night of the 14th to the 15th of June, general headquarters ordered an actual concentration of the army in the triangle of Hannut – Namur – Mazy / Onoz.

Having the 1st corps covering the concentration, Zieten was supposed to observe the enemy and to ascertain its strength and direction, while at the same time he had to keep a sharp eye upon Binche and the Roman road, on the extreme right flank of the army, as to make sure Napoleon would not penetrate between Wellington's and Blücher's army.

As Zieten's information about the hostilities dropped in during the morning, the impression in central headquarters rose that a French force was advancing towards Charleroi along both banks of the Sambre.

In this knowledge, the decision was taken in the morning to concentrate the army near Sombreffe, as by noon Gneisenau wrote to Von Müffling: "Die Armee wird sich morgen in der Stellung bei Sombreffe concentrieren, wo der Fürst gesonnen ist, die Schlacht anzunehmen."

But by the moment this was written, the actual orders for such a concentration were far from being given. On the contrary, in fact, these would only follow 10 to 11 hours later, on the late evening of the 15th of June.

Even though Blücher himself might have been eager to fight Napoleon near Sombreffe [²⁴], the way the Prussian staff saw it, the 15th of June would be used for the concentration in this triangle. Only if the situation asked for it and there would be time enough to do so, the further concentration in the position of Sombreffe of at least the 2nd and the 3rd corps would be ordered for that day as well, otherwise it would be done the next day.

The only corps which was ordered further south-west during the day was the 4th corps. It was not ordered towards Sombreffe, but towards Gembloux. So, if everything would run as it was planned on paper, by nightfall of the 15th of June, the Prussian army would be in positions in and in rear of Fleurus (1st corps), between Mazy and Onoz (2nd corps), in and around Namur, on the left bank of the Meuse (3rd corps) and near Hannut (4th corps), while the headquarters of Blücher would be at Sombreffe.

As stated above, even though he may have been eager to fight Napoleon in his pre-studied position of Sombreffe, it was clear to Blücher that his movements would depend on those of the French: either Napoleon would move towards Wellington or towards his army. In fact, he wrote to the Prussian king on the late evening: "Morgen wird es sich entscheiden, ob der Feind sich gegen mich oder gegen den Herzog Wellington wenden wird." ²⁵

For this reason, the concentration of the army near Sombreffe was in the first case meant as a basis for further operations later, or to fight a battle in the second place.

On the late evening of the 15th of June, the actual concentration of most of the army around the position of Sombreffe was ordered, as the 2nd corps was drawn there, while the 3rd was drawn to Mazy. This concentration was planned for the very early hours of the 16th of June.

It had been at 11.30 a.m. that the 4th corps was ordered to leave for Gembloux by daybreak on the 16th of June. This order was reiterated later that day.

In the night of the 15th (probably after midnight), as the Prussian staff was aware of the problems with the advance of the 4th corps, no further orders were issued for the corps at the same time as the ones for the others. It is not fully clear whether Gembloux was already a compromise with the existing situation or that Von Bülow was *originally* expected to be in Sombreffe by the early morning of the 16th of June, as the events with the corps blurred these intentions, but I do not feel he was (see below).

Again, even though Blücher himself would have wanted to fight Napoleon, it was his staff which made the more careful arrangements, ordering Von Bülow to Gembloux and Pirch I to Mazy.

Von Bülow, being near Gembloux, was ordered there (and not to Sombreffe right away) to be used as a reserve for an imminent battle, either for an offensive later in the day in case of success, or as a reserve in case of a reverse.²⁶

It is in the orders and reports of the late evening of the 15th of June, so before the Prussian staff was aware of the delay of the march of the 4th corps, that for Von Bülow was required to head for Gembloux and not Sombreffe.²⁷

At the same time, the 2nd corps was kept at Mazy first to secure the Namur road during the early hours of the day. It is not surprising that the Prussian staff wanted to be sure about the protection of their lines of communication until the very last moment, while at the same time to concentrate near Sombreffe and also to have the possibility to link up with Wellington to their right.

Blücher and Gneisenau, in their letters of the late evening of the 15th of June to Wellington, Schwarzenberg, Von dem Knesebeck and the Prussian king were optimistic about the concentration of the army near Sombreffe which was planned – at least for the 2nd and 3rd corps - for the very early hours of the 16th of June, and for the 4th corps for the afternoon of that day.

This optimism all was most probably based upon the orders which had been issued during the night of the 14th and during the 15th of June; yet, this was mere theory.

The same moment, however, that these letters were issued, the Prussian leadership had its doubts about the fact whether the 2nd corps would be able to reach Sombreffe by daybreak as Gneisenau wrote to Zieten: “Das 2.Armeekorps ist heute erst spät konzentriert gewesen; es ist also noch nicht gewiss, ob es der Absicht gemäss morgen mit Tagesanbruch wirklich hier eintrifft.”

In reality, things did not develop the way they were planned.

Earlier that day, Zieten was ordered, in the case of a retreat, not to fall back further as Fleurus. Although being attacked, the 1st corps accomplished this goal (see above) and took up its full positions in rear of Fleurus in the late evening.

The majority of the 2nd corps, however, was - according to the order of the night of the 14th of June - supposed to take up a bivouac between Mazy and Onoz on the morning of the 15th of June, but it only finished this operation by daybreak on the 16th of June.

Meanwhile, on the 15th of June by 10.30 p.m., it had been ordered to take up a position near Sombreffe by 4 a.m. on the 16th, but consequently it now started to do so only by 10 a.m.²⁸

Thielmann finished the concentration of his 3rd corps by the late evening of the 15th of June on the left bank of the Meuse. Yet, it was at that very same evening that orders were sent out for him to be with his corps at Mazy by daybreak on the 16th of June. It was, however, around that time that the corps left its positions near Namur and the result was that the first units only reached Point du Jour by noon on the 16th of June, only three hours before the battle of Ligny started.

The concentration of the Prussian army clearly suffered from the defective communication system, which was in itself enhanced by the hierarchy in the different units, from the highest ranks down to the smallest units.²⁹ While the concentration orders for the different army-corps left Namur towards midnight of the 14th of June, it took them almost five hours to reach Ciney instead of two.

There is no clear idea at what time they reached Pirch I at Namur – one is inclined to believe before 1 a.m. – yet some units of this corps only got their orders by 9 a.m. or others even by 2 p.m. (like the 22nd regiment).³⁰

The corps of Von Bülow.

The delay of the 4th corps was even worse and this delay resulted in the total absence of the corps at the battle of Ligny.³¹

The first order to Von Bülow was issued by Gneisenau in evening of the 14th June; it requested him to place his units in such a way that the corps could be concentrated in and around Hannut in one march.³²

Von Bülow must have complied with the order without delay, but this was not the way it would go with orders which were yet to come. The order was courteous, but short. And this had a reason.

Von Bülow, with his high esteem of his own skills and state of service, and this linked to a difficult character, made him a delicate corps-commander; and this was just not what he wanted to be. He believed to be superior to a corps-commander and wanted to be treated like that: his idea was not to carry out an order as such, but what he needed was context and background information, so that he could form his own opinion about what he was ought to do. In fact, he wanted to be involved in the matters central headquarters was dealing with. It was for this reason that he was kept afar from there and that he was only given the information he strictly needed. And this was why Gneisenau had cut the order short: what he needed was obedience, and not all kinds of comments.

Von Bülow's attitude towards Gneisenau was one of contempt, as Von Bülow was a member of an old, established Prussian family, while Gneisenau was not. In addition, Gneisenau was also junior in rank.³³ The relationship was such that even the presence of Gneisenau's signature was enough to raise Von Bülow's irritation as a result. Gneisenau tried to design his orders in such a way to avoid sharpness and to be polite, and yet to leave Von Bülow no room for initiative of his own. Yet, in such a situation a proper leadership was of course virtually impossible.³⁴

There is a claim that Von Bülow immediately informed Blücher of the receipt of the order, as well as that he sent the new disposition for his corps to Von Grolman. This claim is probably based upon the note written by Von Below on the order of the evening of the 14th of June (see above).³⁵

In fact, I believe it is this note itself which refers to the mission of Von Below later that day, carrying the report for Gneisenau and the disposition in question for Von Grolman and not to documents sent out immediately after arrival of the order.

More importantly, it is Von Bülow himself who writes in his letter which was carried by Von Below about his disposition as if it was the first one and he also makes no allusion to any former reports. In fact, the note of Von Below as referred to, refers itself to the letter cited above as written by Von Bülow.

The second order for Von Bülow was issued at midnight in the night of the 14th of June, but this order was seriously delayed in its transmission.

This all had to do with the fact that at Huy, halfway between Namur and Liège, there was only one subaltern present to be used as a messenger, but he was on his way to Liège with the order of the evening; before he got back, the second order was delivered at Huy, which was therefore not forwarded.³⁶

Von Bülow was ordered to concentrate his corps in close cantonments near Hannut on the 15th, but by the time he got this order - during the late morning of the 15th of June - he decided to postpone this movement until 4 a.m. on the 16th of June.

The reason for Von Bülow to do so was the fact that he, and his chief of staff, Von Valentini, saw Hannut as the central concentration point for the army, and not as a stage for a march to another point; this idea had been fed by prior orders which had indicated Hannut as point of concentration for the 4th corps.

Two of these orders did so in particular. One of 26th of May stated: "Sollte der Feind gegen die Maas und Charleroi Offensive Bewegungen machen, so wollen E.E. Ihr unterhabenes Korps bei Hannut versammeln, wohin ich dann die weiteren Befehle senden werde." Here it is explicitly stated that Bülow had to wait at Hannut for further orders there, so Hannut was no goal as such.

The other one was dated 6th of June and implied that in all instructions for the dispositions for the 4th corps the idea should be that the corps could assemble at Hannut within one day.³⁷

It is also here that Hannut was a place for concentrating the corps as such; all Von Bülow added was his own interpretation.

It can be assumed that Von Bülow was in general terms informed of the agreement between Wellington and Blücher to cooperate in attacking Napoleon or to resist him, in case of a French offensive. Taking the idea of a Prussian concentration in and around Hannut, as a goal as such, didn't fit in this context.

Yet, now, in Von Bülow's idea there would be plenty of time before the whole army would be concentrated and therefore he postponed his march, in stead of continuing it right away towards Hannut.³⁸

Was Gneisenau in his first order to Von Bülow concise, clear and objective, in his second he was not very strong in the choice of his words; he was too polite and it would have been better, in view of the situation he was in, to be more direct.³⁹

In his letter to Von Gneisenau, Von Bülow expresses his concern about the arrival of two consecutive orders, which might have been confusing for the units of his corps the more as they were forced to make a night-march and accordingly Von Bülow uses this concern as a reason for his decision to postpone his march towards Hannut.⁴⁰ It might have been confusing in some way, but we are dealing here with a changing situation of an imminent offensive, which was compressed for Von Bülow by the delay in the transmission of his orders.

It is also in this connection that Von Valentini uses the argument that the second order would have a negative effect upon "das Innere der Truppenteile" and that the exhaustion of the troops also played a role. It is, however, in this last argument that something is touched upon which was no an issue then yet and as far as the first argument is concerned: as if the men in the rank and file would notice, and even then, this is something which could be explained if really necessary. And if Von Bülow was afraid for a lack of supplies at Hannut, this would not plea for him as a true commander, let alone that this aspect could never be an argument not to carry out an order.⁴¹

Later, the absence of a declaration of war was used as an argument to postpone the march to Hannut.⁴² In the situation which developed – based upon secrecy- such a declaration was of course out of the question and it was naive to ask for one.

In Von Bülow's idea it was foolish to believe in a French offensive coming from Maubeuge, as he even writes on the 15th of June in a letter: "Die Herren in Namur haben auf einmal die Angst bekommen, dass Napoleon von Maubeuge aus, wo er angekommen und den grössten Teil seiner Truppen zusammengezogen haben soll, gegen uns zur Offensive übergehen werde. Ich glaube nun dieses durchaus nicht."⁴³

What Von Bülow also needed was a more integral approach: in this case information about the directions / destinations the other army-corps were supposed to go, so to have an idea of the general concentration and of the general idea of central headquarters.⁴⁴

But even though the order was not put in the strongest terms, Von Bülow actually did not carry out the two main instructions, and that was a most serious omission: Von Bülow neither concentrated his corps right away in and around Hannut, nor did he establish a communication line, through Hanret, between Hannut and Namur, or one between Liège and Namur, through Hannut. It is in this connection that Von Bülow writes in his disposition of the early afternoon of the 15th of June: “Von jeder Brigade begiebt sich der Offizier des Generalstabes heute nach Hannut, um von dem Rittmeister Von Below noch heute Abend die Dislokation en detail zu empfangen.”

It was Von Below however who was used by Von Bülow as a messenger to inform Gneisenau of his situation and as far as I have been able to ascertain he was not replaced. In other words: there was no representative of the general staff of the 4th corps who acted by proxy of Von Bülow in Hannut, not for the distribution of the quarters for the troops, nor for forwarding orders destined for general Von Bülow, even if they were marked as urgent.

This is a very serious omission which can be attributed to general-major Von Valentini and general Von Bülow. In this context it is also Roth who writes about the absence of an officer of the general staff of the 4th corps: “Euer Hochwohlgeb. Befehl zu folge habe ich mich auf das Schleunigste hierher [=Hannut] begeben, um mich der mündlichen Befehle an den Herrn General Grafen Von Bülow zu entledigen. Allein ich habe hier weiter Niemand als die Generalstabs-Offiziere von den Brigaden des 4ten Armee-Korps vorgefunden, welche für die erst morgen von Lüttich abrückenden und hier eintreffenden Truppen gedachten Korps die Quartiere reguliren wollen.”⁴⁵

Around the time Von Bülow received the second order, a third one was sent out to Von Bülow and this one was sent to Hannut, as it was presumed Von Bülow would be there, but he wasn't.⁴⁶ And to make matters even worse: due to the defective transmission system the order stranded there.⁴⁷ It instructed Von Bülow to leave for Gembloux on the 16th by daybreak, at the latest. Yet, towards midnight it was clear to the general Prussian staff that Von Bülow would not be able to make that, as by then Von Below had arrived with Von Bülow's letter.

If Von Bülow would have been in Hannut that afternoon, or at least his representative, the order could have been handed over by 3 p.m. and Von Bülow could have got it later that afternoon. Now, he got it at 5 a.m. on the 16th of June, most probably about 12 hours later.

On the other hand, it was also a responsibility of the sender to have the order forwarded from Hannut, or at least to have a message go out telling Von Bülow there was an urgent order for him.

That day, in total three documents coming from Von Bülow about his concentration in and around Hannut must have reached central headquarters.⁴⁸

Though there is no specification, one of them must at least have been the letter which was carried by Von Below. The second one was probably the disposition which was accompanying this letter and which was sent to Von Grolman.

Yet another possible document is the information which was received by Von Bülow on the 14th of June, in French, but without a place and signature. It told Von Bülow that a concentration took place of about 120.000 men between Givet and Avesnes and that everything seemed to be moving since the 12th of June. Strong enemy masses would be moving towards Chimay and Beaumont. A commander of the outposts would have said that if the Prussians would not take the offensive before 72 hours, the French would do so.

It was all this information which Von Bülow sent to Von Grolman with the additional note: “Ew.Hochwohlgeborenen verfehle Ich nicht, die soeben erhaltene Nachricht, um keine Zeit zu verlieren, augenblicklich zuzustellen, und bedaure Ich, keine Zeitungen erhalten zu haben.” It is remarkable that this note doesn’t contain any details about the movements of his corps, but Von Bülow must have felt he did the right thing; the third order also had not arrived yet.

During the 15th of June - it was probably during the very late afternoon or the very early evening - that Gneisenau sent lieutenant Von Roth out to Von Bülow with the same order as the one which was issued at 11.30 a.m.

What actually triggered him to do so remains unclear, but it might have been the sight of the French near Gilly, the moment the general staff reached the position of Sombreffe.⁴⁹

The oral order - as carried by Roth – is described as if Von Bülow was instructed “dass der Feldmarschall morgen bei Sombreffe eine Schlacht annehmen würde und bestimmt darauf rechne, dass das 4te Armee-Korps dazu um 10 Uhr morgens bei Sombreffe eintreffe.”⁵⁰

However, I do not believe that such an order could have been issued at that time. First of all, it is Von Roth himself who writes in his report to Von Grolman: “Indem ich mich beeile Euer Hochwohlgeboren hiervon die schuldigste Anzeige zu machen, bemerke ich zugleich unerthänigst, wie es nach Lage der Dinge wohl ganz unmöglich sein wird, dass das 4te Korps die Höhe von Gembloux erreicht.”

If he would have carried an instruction for Von Bülow to reach Sombreffe, he would not have referred to Gembloux. Further, Gneisenau wrote to Pirch I at 10.30 p.m. – so about 4.5 hours after he had sent out Roth: “General Graf Bülow rückt morgen (16) nach Gembloux” And in his orders for Zieten of 11 p.m. and 3 a.m.. he writes “[..] das 4. Armeekorps marschirt nach Gembloux.”

Von Bülow was not requested to be in Sombreffe right from the beginning, but to be at an early hour on the 16th of June near Gembloux, in readiness to intervene later that day in a battle which was expected near Sombreffe.⁵¹

Whether Gneisenau instructed Von Roth to inform Von Bülow about an intended battle near Sombreffe remains an open question, but that may very well have been the case, in contradiction to his former instructions and explanations to Von Bülow.

In the midst of all misfortune, it was owing to Von Roth’s initiative that Von Bülow was ordered what he was supposed to do and that Von Gneisenau was, in his turn, informed about the situation.

It may very well be that the message which Roth’s companion carried for Von Gneisenau led him to issue the order for Von Bülow , on the early morning of the 16th of June, to march over the Roman road to the plateau of Ardenelle.

And it is even in this march on the morning of the 16th of June that Von Bülow seems to be taking his time, halting his units for a almost two hours near Hannut.

Before jumping to conclusions, I come to Von Bülow’s idea about his position in the situation. In this, two accounts are of prime importance – those of Von Below and Von Valentini. Yet, there is another letter written on the 15th of June by Von Bülow which throws important light upon the question. It reads: “In glaube durchaus nicht dass Napoleon zur Offensive übergehen wird, besonders dass er es auf die Weise, wie man vermutet, thun wird, nämlich auf der sogenannten Römerstrasse zwischen uns und den Engländern, als wohin ich morgen nach Hannut marschiere. Allein durch diese unsere Bewegung wird das ganze Land zwischen der Maas und Mosel entblösst. Wir werden ihn vielleicht auf den Gedanken bringen, ein Korps hier vorgehen zu lassen, um diese Provinzen zu verwüsten; über Philippeville oder Givet kann ich dieses wieder zurückziehen.”⁵²

What Von Bülow did was combining Maubeuge and Hannut as the direction from which it was thought the French would come, that is roughly along the old Roman road. Having the concentration of the complete Prussian army in and around Hannut, with the 4th corps coming from the east, there was no hurry to move westwards. Von Bülow must have thought it better to reach Hannut with troops which had had a rest, instead of moving in a swift march and by night.

It was also Von Bülow's idea to cover the area between the Meuse and the Moselle, the opposite direction of where the army was supposed to be heading. While Gneisenau was thinking about a concentration of the army to give battle, Von Bülow – not having any context information - was reserved to uncover his left, while at the same time he did not believe in a French offensive coming from Maubeuge / Beaumont.

In that sense it might have been better if Gneisenau had still given Von Bülow a bit more background information, not so much as to give him clues for comments, but to stress the importance of a concentration to his right and in this way to bring him off his pre-occupation with his left.⁵³

The issue of the delay in Von Bülow's movements on the 15th of June contains several elements which came together and which enhanced each other in a such a way that it had a most unfortunate result on the 16th of June, in the absence of the corps at Ligny.

Most of these elements have been discussed. Yet, ultimately, it all comes down to those things both Von Bülow and Gneisenau were faced with and what they did with it, the moment both men – each from his own position – saw things were not running as they were planned.

Von Bülow complied with the first order right away, but for the second order he did not as he decided to postpone the movement until the next day. And it is just here that the most unfortunate combination comes up of an order which is not strong in its expressions and of Von Bülow's own ideas.

To make matters even worse, no representation of the general staff of the 4th corps was placed at Hannut, thereby preventing the direct link between this staff and the general staff of the Prussian army.

On the other hand is it most unfortunate that Gneisenau didn't formulate his second order in particular in a stronger way, and I feel he should have done so in the current situation, by just continuing the clear and objective style he used in his first one.

On the other hand - as his superior – he knew that Von Bülow simply had to obey and if he didn't and events proved unsuccessful as a result, the problem would eventually fall back towards Von Bülow. It is in this connection most fortunate for Von Bülow that his corps had such an important share in the victory of Waterloo three days later as it obscured Von Bülow's responsibilities in his absence at the battle of Ligny.

The third order for Von Bülow was written by Blücher and was again more objective, and yet polite, but not in an artificial way. Yet, by the time it was written, the Prussian general staff was not aware yet of Von Bülow's postponement of the concentration of the 4th corps in and around Hannut.

In the fourth order, carried by Von Roth, it wasn't either, and it is for an analysis of the situation with Von Bülow most unfortunate that this order was an oral one and that for that reason its precise content has not been preserved. Additionally, it is also unfortunately not known why it was sent out at the particular time it was. Yet, I do know that Von Roth was supposed to ride to Hannut as fast as he could.⁵⁴

In this context, in taking a closer look at the sequence of orders issued for Von Bülow on the 14th and 15th of June, it is clear that the two first ones run parallel in time to the ones which were issued to the other army-corps. The third one was issued by 11.30 a.m. on the 15th of June. This may have to do with the fact that some time before the decision was taken to

concentrate in the position of Sombreffe. Although orders for the other army-corps were issued only late that evening, the Prussian general staff must have felt the need then to draw Von Bülow nearer to this position, presuming he was then still in and around Hannut which was far to the east, relative to the planned positions of the other corps (which were in and in rear of Fleurus, Namur and Mazy / Onoz). Taken in this way, all orders could not have been given more early and gave, presuming everything went as it should, enough time for Von Bülow to arrive near Gembloux in the afternoon of the 16th of June.

Of course both Gneisenau and Von Bülow had to deal with the defective system of communications within the Prussian army, and there were the realities of the emotions of their difficult relationship, as well as Von Bülow's ideas about the strategic situation, but if I break the whole issue down to the very principles of the war it is that Von Bülow simply didn't follow the important instructions he got for the 15th of June and these were to concentrate his corps in and around Hannut, to establish his headquarters there, as well as a communication post at Hanret.⁵⁵

In what follows on the 16th of June there is a strange absence of urgency in the existing correspondence relating to Von Bülow's movements.

It was around midnight in the night of the 15th of June that Gneisenau learned about the postponement of the concentration of the 4th corps in and around Hannut.

Several hours later (maybe between 5 and 7 a.m. on the 16th of June) he must have understood that the third order for Von Bülow had stranded at Hannut, but that Von Roth had continued his way to Liège to deliver the fourth order, i.e. the one which ordered Von Bülow to leave (from Hannut) for Gembloux by daybreak on the 16th of June.

It was probably as a result of this that Gneisenau then sent Von Bülow the order to proceed with his units as far as the plateau of Ardenelle, but this order is merely an instruction how to get there. There is no indication of any astonishment, not even in the slightest terms, about the extreme delay in his movements.

In his turn, Von Bülow himself - in his reaction to this order - continues in a most neutral way, not referring to any misunderstandings etc. which had occurred or so. This may have to do with his attitude towards Gneisenau, but he even doesn't urge his units to speed up their movements towards the plateau. In fact, he halts them for probably about two hours near Hannut, thereby increasing the delay even more.

The concentration of the army near Sombreffe.

Earlier in this chapter I mentioned the huge gap in time between the actual decision of the Prussian leadership to intend to have a battle in the position near Sombreffe and the actual orders to concentrate the army there. This is not only most important to note as a fact, but it is also important in relation to the cooperation of the Prussians towards Wellington. Fact was that they announced this concentration to him by noon.

How puzzling this gap in time might seem, the reason should in my mind be sought in the instructions issued to Zieten that day, which read (at 11 a.m): "Ew.Excellenz ersuche ich, Ihre Bewegungen so einzurichten, dass Sie, wenn es möglich ist, heute nicht weiter als bis Fleurus zurückzugehen, da ich morgen in der Gegend von Sombreffe die Armee zu konzentriren gedenke" and (at 11 p.m.) "Damit also die Konzentrierung hinter dem Lignebach mir grosser Sicherheit erfolgen könne, ist es wichtig, dass Ew.Exzellenz die Aufstellung behalten, welche Sie diesen Abend okkupiirt haben."

To make sure the concentration of the army around Sombreffe could take place, the Prussians wanted to be sure about Zieten's position the moment the fighting on the 15th of June would be

over and it was not until 10 p.m. (and even later) that the actions had died out and that most of the 1st corps had taken up its positions for the night, and these were just in rear of Fleurus.

Right after, the orders for the other corps were issued. So, the delay in these orders should in my mind be sought in the caution of the Prussian leadership to have a decent cover for the concentration of the other corps around Sombreffe for the next morning. This cover was one towards Fleurus, but also one towards Marbais.⁵⁶

This cover also explains why the 1st corps initially was not allowed to move to its right on the morning of the 16th of June.

At the same time, however, this put a tremendous strain on the moment the Prussian leadership expected to have this concentration completed, let alone the other problems which were encountered during the execution of these orders and of those issued previously.

Additionally, the Prussian high command also kept a look over its left shoulder by leaving one battalion and two squadrons of the 3rd corps on the left bank of the Meuse in observation of Philippeville and Givet.

At the very late evening of the 15th of June, the letters as sent out to Wellington, the Prussian king, Schwarzenberg and Von der Kneesebeck breathe an optimism relative to the concentration of the army near Sombreffe which had just been ordered and this while the Prussian headquarters then knew that the 2nd corps was slow in concentrating and most probably unable to reach Onoz / Mazy by daybreak as planned.

The 1st, 2nd and 3rd corps were expected near Sombreffe by daybreak on the 16th of June (or possibly even on the 15th of June), while the 4th corps was expected there in the afternoon.

Further, the general message as sent out about the Prussian impression of the French intentions was ambiguous: while towards Wellington it was suggested (at least at noon that day) as a fact that Napoleon marched against the Prussian army, it was towards king Friedrich that Blücher expressed himself in the sense that Napoleon could either turn against him or against Wellington the next day. Also Gneisenau wrote in a similar sense that the movements of the Prussian army depended on those of the enemy, so for him both options of a defensive and an offensive were then still open.

This impression was founded upon the information the Prussians had on the French movements at that time: a strong breakthrough around Charleroi with forces stretching as far as Frasnes and Fleurus, while at the same time there was an apparent absence of enemy forces towards Namur.

The call upon Wellington by 11 p.m. to hear about his intentions and situation at that time must have been founded upon a presumption that he would have heard about hostilities from Zieten during the day and that he could have reported back to Namur right after. Of course Prussian headquarters couldn't know that it was only by 5.30 p.m. that Wellington first heard about these hostilities directly from the Ziethen.

The communication with Wellington.

On the 15th of June the Prussian communication with Wellington took place through two lines: a direct one from the Prussian general staff and from general Zieten on the one hand and an indirect one, running from units of the 1st Prussian corps towards Dutch outposts (and beyond to Wellington) on the other.

As far as the first line is concerned, the first communication opened by Blücher towards Wellington was his letter dated noon. In this letter Blücher announced to Von Müffling the

outbreak of the hostilities at 4.30 a.m. and the fact that the enemy advanced along both banks of the Sambre.

Let me start by stating that it is incomprehensible why the concentration of the Prussian army - which was ordered towards midnight of the 14th of June - was communicated towards Wellington in the letter involved, i.e. only some twelve hours later.⁵⁷

In the context of the cooperation of both armies this was a most serious omission. What type of information led the Prussian headquarters to order this concentration remains a mystery, but as a fact it should have been reported to Wellington right away.⁵⁸

Through Zieten it knew that it could only have been somewhere in the afternoon that Wellington would become aware of the hostilities, so this gave the Prussian army a very strong headstart in the concentration of their army compared to Wellington's.

This is a most important element to take into account into the assessment of the situation of the allied armies on the 15th and 16th of June.

It had been somewhere between 9 and 11 a.m. that Blücher had decided to concentrate his army in the position of Sombreffe on the 16th of June and it was also this decision which was now communicated. At the same time, Blücher made it clear to the duke that he intended to offer Napoleon a battle there.

As a result, at noon, Von Müffling was informed that the same day the 1st corps was supposed to observe the enemy and not to fall back further as Fleurus, while the 2nd corps would move to a position near Mazy and Onoz, the 3rd corps to a position near Namur and the 4th corps to one in and around Hannut. At the same time, the impression was given that the 2nd and 3rd corps could continue their movements the same day as far as Sombreffe and Onoz respectively, if this would prove necessary.

As far as Wellington was concerned it was asked when and where he would concentrate his army and what his decisions were. Blücher would await this news as soon as possible in his new headquarters, to be established at Sombreffe. The letter literally states: "*Das Hauptquartier geht in 2 Stunden nach Sombref vor, wohin ich schleunigst von Ihnen die Benachrichtigung erwarte, wann und wo sich der Herzog Wellington concentrirt und was er beschlossen hat.*"⁵⁹

I quote this passage as this a vital one, as it asks Wellington for the first time during the campaign about his intentions and decisions. It is done in a general way and not more than that, let alone to state there was something like a request for direct support.

The way the letter was written the Prussian staff wanted to transmit their impression they had that Napoleon threw his main army to the east, against Blücher. But having this impression, at the same time there was no reference to some kind of fixed point as could have been agreed upon in former times for Wellington to concentrate his army in such a particular case.

The request to Wellington is a most neutral one, without any reference to some kind of concentration point or protocol formerly agreed upon.

The next communication of the Prussian general headquarters towards Von Müffling took place probably around 11 p.m. (see above). It is the document of which I do not possess the text in extenso, but only the summary of the register of staff.

It reads: "*Wegen der Unternehmung des Feindes. Benachrichtigung über das Eintreffen des Corps bei Sombreffe. Annahme der Schlacht hieselbst im Falle der Feind uns nicht auf der rechten Flanke umgeht. Von Intesion [sic] des Herzogs Wellington schleunigst bekannt zu machen.*"

It is most unfortunate that the complete text is unavailable, but on the other hand it is for the most part a second, apparently more urgent request to Wellington to know what his intentions are. The new element in this document is the fear of the Prussian staff for the right flank of the army in relation to the actual acceptance of a battle near Sombreffe. Other than that, most elements

regarding the French advance communicated to Wellington can be reconstructed with the aid of the other reports written around the same time and these elements must have been:

- the belief of the Prussian staff that they faced 5 French army corps and the imperial guard
- the advance of French troops through Charleroi and along the Sambre towards Fleurus
- that it would become clear on the 16th of June whether Napoleon would turn against Wellington or Blücher
- the impression that Napoleon might have the intention to break through between the allied armies, also because of the fact that the French were advancing along the Brussels road

The period between noon and 11 p.m. is a huge lapse of time in the communication between both armies. During that period of time it had become clear to the Prussian high command that the 2nd corps was delayed in its marches and that it would not be sure whether it would be able to arrive by daybreak at Sombreffe. This news was communicated to Zieten in Gneisenau's order of 11 p.m. This order was a part of the set of orders issued around that time for the further concentration of the army in the position of Sombreffe. It is unclear whether this delay has been mentioned to Von Müffling in the letter referred to above.⁶⁰

What stands out, however, is that even at this stage of the campaign – the moment the Prussian army was supposed to be concentrated in the triangle of Hannut – Namur – Mazy / Onoz – while being covered towards Fleurus - there was no actual and formal request to Wellington for assistance in the expected battle the next day.

From other letters and reports written around the same time it becomes clear that the Prussian general staff expressed its concern that it still had not heard from Wellington. At the same time it knew that Wellington's extreme left flank had seen contact with the enemy and that it seemed as if Napoleon intended to push between both armies, but in what situation Wellington was and what his plan were was fully unclear.⁶¹

This element of a French threat there was taken up by the Prussian leadership on the early morning of the 16th of June, as this was the reason to send out major Von Brunneck towards Quatre Bras.

The communication of general Zieten to Wellington (in fact it was Von Müffling, see below) has been – and still is – a subject of strong controversy, as it was the first direct communication from the Prussian army towards Wellington about the outbreak of the hostilities, and this is related to the question at what time Wellington learned about them for the first time, at least from the Prussians.⁶²

Here, I will only deal with the Prussian communication towards Wellington as such, and not when and how this communication reached Wellington (see below).

Zieten himself produced two documents in which he wrote about the communication he had towards Wellington that day.

The first one dates from the 21st of January 1819. It was a letter to Von Grolman who had – for some reason- asked him two days earlier about the time of his communication.

Von Grolman wrote:

“Ew.Excellenz haben, nach mündlichen Nachrichten, am 15 Juni 1815 schon bei Tagesanbruch einen Courier an den Herzog von Wellington nach Brüssel abgefertigt mit der Nachricht des Angriffs durch die Franzosen, und dieser Courier ist auch früh um 9 Uhr zu Brüssel eingetroffen. Da nun aber von diesem Umstände keine schriftliche Notiz bey den Acten befindlich ist, so ersuche Ich E.E. ganz ergebenst, wenn es seyn kann, um eine Abschrift des von E.E. an den Herzog von Wellington gemachten Rapports mit Bemerkung des Überbringers und der Zeit, wenn diese Nachricht in Brüssel angekommen ist.”⁶³

Apparently, oral reports went round in Berlin, stating Zieten would have reported towards Wellington by daybreak and for that reason Von Grolman made the enquiry.

Zieten replied:

“Da der Briefwechsel mit dem Feld Marschall Herzog Wellington in französischer Sprache geführt werden musste, und da Ich im Jahre 1815 keinen Offizier hatte, der der französische Sprache so mächtig war, dass derselbe sie gut schreiben konnte, so musste Ich die ganze Korrespondenz mit dem Feld Marschall Herzog Wellington selbst führen: daher ist keine Abschrift von den Akten genommen worden, welchen Ich den 15. Juny 1815 des Morgens 3 4/5 Uhr durch einen Kurier-Jäger, dessen Namen mir entfallen ist, nach Brüssel sendete.”⁶⁴

However, the time as given by Zieten of 3.45 a.m. cannot be the right one as by then the French offensive hadn't even started yet.

And Zieten's motive as having no one on his staff who wrote French is not a very strong argument either.

All in all, it is a document which is not very convincing, apart from the error it contains as far as the most vital element is concerned: the time it was sent out.

In his second account, his autobiography (of 1839), Zieten has yet another version of the events. He writes: “Die Mehrzahl glaubt Bonaparte habe den 15. Juni 1815 das 1. Armee-Korps, welches ich befahl, überfallen, und Ich gestehe, dass alle, die mich den Tag vorher gesehen haben, glauben mussten, Ich ahndete nichts. Ich hatte aber schon den 13. Alle Bagage nach Gembloux gehen lassen; den 14. Folgte meine eigene. Denselben Aben sendete Ich den Major Von Froelich zu den Vorposten, um die Feuer des Feindes zu untersuchen. Ich bat meine Wirtin, da Ich sie dem Trubel überhoben wissen wollte, sie möchte nach Brüssel gehen, wo ein schönes Ball sein würde. Wie den anderen Morgen der Lärm anging, stürzte sie die Treppe herunter und sagte: Das ist wohl der Ball, von dem Sie gestern sprachen? Ich lachte. Des Abends, wie Ich zur Ruhe ging, befahl Ich der Dienst habenden Ordonnanz, mich auf der ersten Schuss zu wecken; den 15. 2 ¼ meldete sie: es sind 3 Kanonen-Schuss gefallen; Ich sprang auf, war ganz angezogen, weckte alle Offiziere, befahl dem Kolonnenjäger Merinsky, Kapitän Von Felden, Major Graf Westphal, gleich zu Pferde bei mir zu sein, diktierte einen deutschen, einen französischen Brief, dass der Krieg angegangen sei und sendete mit dem ersten den p. Westphal nach Namur zum Feldmarschall Blücher, mit dem 2. Den p. Merinsky nach Brüssel zum Herzog von Wellington. Von Felden ritt hinaus, um die Signalschüsse zu geben.

Ich führe dies alles an, um zu beweisen dass die Ruhe, die Ich am 14. Bewiesen habe, nur Veranlassung war, als wäre Ich sorgenlos. Im allgemeinen glaube Ich, hat man mir im Felde nie angesehen, was Ich dachte; ich habe immer ziemlich gleich geschienen, und daher mag wohl die Kälte, die Unempfindlichkeit gekommen sein, die Ich später in allen Begebenheiten meines Lebens, selbst in der Gesellschaft manifestiert habe.”⁶⁵

In this account, anecdotal and defensive at the same time, Zieten fixes the time he was informed of the hostilities at 2.15 a.m., a time even earlier as the former one, and therefore even further from the truth. He doesn't precise the time he wrote to Wellington, but he gives the impression that this must not have been long afterwards.

Yet again, this version simply is of no use in this context as by the time say between 2.15 and 3.30 a.m. French offensive actions hadn't started yet.

And do we have to believe that a “Kolonnenjäger” – a supply train provost – was sent out by Zieten for such an important mission as to inform Prussian central headquarters of the actual hostilities?⁶⁶

From the fragments I have of the autobiography in question, Zieten is extremely self-orientated and he makes claims which simply do not hold. For the battle of Waterloo for example he claims that he left for Mont Saint Jean on his own account, that he saved the

Scottish units at Wellington's left wing, that he in fact decided the battle and that the French Old Guard would have advanced against him – all most erroneous claims⁶⁷

More importantly, irrespective of what the report contained, I do not believe it was written to the duke of Wellington himself, but to Von Müffling instead, even though this is inconsistent with his earlier reports, which Zieten wrote to Wellington personally and therefore in French. In that respect, Zieten's argument of the French language it had to be written in is not applicable.

In fact, it is Von Hügel, the representative of Württemberg at Wellington's staff wrote at 6 p.m. in his letter to the Austrian king: "In diesem Augenblick reitet ein preussischer Husar bei dem General Von Müffling vor, der hart neben mir wohnt, und bringt ihm die Nachricht, die Müffling mir sogleich mittheilt, dass heute vormittag Napoleon die preussische Armee an der Sambre bei Thuin angegriffen hat. Resultat noch nicht bekannt. Soeben kommt auch Müffling wieder von dem Herzog zurück. Der Kronprinz der Niederlande hatte gemeldet, dass auf unserem linken Flügel starkes Kanonenfeuer gehört werde. Wellington befahl sofort allen Corps, die ganze Nacht zu marschieren um sich zu konzentrieren. Müffling liess mich auch Zietens Bericht lesen: er müsse sich mit seinen Vorposten gegen Fleurus hin zurückziehen vor bedeutender Übermacht."⁶⁸

Other than that, it is also Von Müffling himself who confirms it was him who received Zieten's report first (see above).

The apparent inconsistency for Zieten not sending his report to Wellington himself, as he used to do before the 15th of June, can also be seen in Prussian headquarters itself. For instance here, the letters sent at noon and at 11 p.m. were not sent to Wellington himself, but to Von Müffling. In my opinion this all had to do with the formal line of communication which was applied during hostilities to keep the liaison up to date of all relevant information.

It is being asserted that Zieten wrote a report to Wellington at the same time as he wrote his first one for Blücher, probably around 5 a.m. and that this report arrived in Brussels at 9 a.m.⁶⁹ For some reason this report would be missing from the records.

I will come back to this supposed time of arrival later, but here it is necessary to state that Zieten's report for Blücher of 5 a.m. contains no reference to such a report (as the one of 8.15 a.m. has).

It is in his second report, dated 8.15 a.m. that Zieten writes:

"Der Feind hat sich bereits in den Besitz von Thuin gesetzt, und die disseitigen Vorposten bis Montigny-Lestigneis [sic] zurückgedrängt. Auf dem linken Ufer der Sambre [sic] dringt er ebenmässig vor. Er ist zu stark, um sich in eizelne hartnäckige Gefechte einzulassen, daher sich die erste und zweite Brigade bis in die Linie von Gosselies und Gilly zurückbegeben müssen.

Napoleon ist selbst zugegen mit seinen sämmtlichen Garden, daher ernsthafte Absichten seinerseits auf diesem Punkte zu vermuthen sind.

Der Feind zeigt besonders viel Kavallerie. Die Truppen, die Thuin vertheidigt haben, haben viel blessirte.

Den herzog Wellington habe ich hiervon Benachrichtigt, und ihn ersucht, sich nunmehr bei Nivelles zu concentrieren, welches derselbe nach einer gestern vom General Von Müffling erhaltenen Nachricht thun will."

A critical element in his report of 8.15 a.m. is that Zieten writes: "Den herzog Wellington habe ich hiervon Benachrichtigt etc.", as if he already had written this report, in that case at 5 a.m.. Yet, I do not believe this was the case.

First of all, it would have been rather singular at the least, if Zieten would have reported in a similar sense to Wellington first and to his immediate superior later. It would also not have been in line with what he wrote in his first report to Blücher in which he says: "Es ist noch keine

Meldung eingegangen. Sobald dieselbe eingeht, werde ich nicht verfehlen, sie Ew. Durchlaucht gehorsamst einzureichen.”

What Zieten wants to do is make clear to Blücher that he had sent out a similar note to Wellington almost at the same time as he did to him, seen from Blücher’s situation, while having the report in his hands.

There is, however, a much more compelling argument to show that the report in question simply could not have been from 5 a.m. as Zieten states “Den herzog Wellington habe ich hiervon Benachrichtigt”. The “hiervon” clearly refers to the foregoing elements of which one was the loss of Thuin. As it is a fact that this took place at 7 a.m. the report referred to could never have been from 5 a.m. Zieten also mentions the French advance upon the road towards Montigny-le-Tilleul, which is even beyond Thuin. As a matter of fact, as this village is about nine kilometers from Thuin, Zieten clearly could not refer but just a most recent report he had received on the French advance and the resulting Prussian retreat.⁷⁰

Additionally, the fact that the prince of Orange wrote to Constant Rebecque about 5 p.m. in a sense that he relieved some of the alarm-measures taken for the units of his army-corps, would in all probability not have been written this way, had Wellington received news of Zieten and the prince of Orange about the outbreak of the hostilities that morning as well.

Last but not least, it is a fact that Zieten sent **one** report to Wellington that day, no more.⁷¹

Further, I do not believe Zieten thought that the situation towards 5 a.m. was urgent enough to inform Blücher, but not then Wellington as well, as he writes:

“Es ist noch keine Meldung eingegangen. [of the actual hostilities] Sobald dieselbe eingeht, werde ich nicht verfehlen, sie Ew. Durchlaucht gehorsamst einzureichen.”

This message is purely Zieten’s observation through hearing and nothing based upon reports and about certain localities.⁷²

Apparently he got more detailed information towards 6.30 a.m. as at that moment he wrote to Blücher about the actual start of the hostilities and at 8.15 a.m. he reported again to Blücher and right after towards 9 a.m. , to Wellington.⁷³

My conclusion therefore is that Zieten wrote his report for Wellington very shortly after the one of 8.15 a.m. to Blücher, probably towards 9 a.m., but this document has – until now – never been found.⁷⁴

So, Ziethen, being the commander on whose corps the first French blows fell, reported to Wellington on the 15th of June towards 9 a.m. Yet, it had already been at 6.30 a.m. that he had reported back to Blücher with more specific information on the French attack and this would in my idea also have been a point in time that he should have done so towards Wellington. From hindsight, this is of course an easy statement but for me it comes from a comparison of the information it contained in relation to Ziethen’s previous report of about 5 a.m. This last one was of a too general character to report upon to Brussels, but at 6.30 a.m. this was no longer the case.

Also, a direct line of communication to Chassé or Van Merlen was not established by the commander of the 1st Prussian corps. In fact, the same morning, it had been Von Steinmetz who informed general Van Merlen (at Saint Symphorien) about the hostilities and his retreat by sending out his chief of staff, major Arnauld de la Périère.

As far as can be reconstructed, it was in his report of 9 a.m. that Ziethen reported towards Wellington about the possibility of his retreat as far as Fleurus, which basically meant that he would move away from Wellington, thereby evacuating the sector between that place and Binche. After he had done so, however, he no longer reported in that sense; apparently he must have felt that general command would do so.

Taking all communication of the Prussian army to Wellington (actually to Von Müffling) on the 15th together, it becomes clear that there were three communications:

1. The one from general Zieten of 9 a.m. on the 15th of June.
2. The one dated noon from Blücher
3. The one of Blücher (or Gneisenau) of 11 p.m.

So on the 15th of June there was a gap in time of 11 hours about the situation of the Prussian army as coming from general headquarters, and as such this would not have been a problem were it not that the information which reached Wellington was information from the morning; information about what happened after that didn't come up until in the communication by 11 p.m. and therefore reached Wellington only the next day, probably between 7 and 10 a.m.

By far the most important information in this was the fact that Zieten had evacuated Charleroi and the road leading from there to Brussels. Though it is unclear whether it was mentioned with so many words in the letter written out at 11 p.m., but this vital news certainly didn't reach Wellington on the 15th of June.⁷⁵

A direct line of communication to Chassé or Van Merlen was not established by the commander of the 1st Prussian corps. In fact, the same morning, it had been Von Steinmetz who informed general Van Merlen (at Saint Symphorien) about the hostilities and his retreat by sending out his chief of staff, major Arnauld de la Périère.⁷⁶ In fact, it had been Von Steinmetz who had reported to them about his own retreat, but not more.

The road leading from Charleroi to Brussels was clearly regarded in the Anglo-Netherlands-German army as being in the Prussian sector; yet, as it had been abandoned it clearly fell back to Wellington. The fact that the evacuation was something for the highest levels of command in both armies can be taken from Constant Rebecque's words as cited by colonel Von Gagern, after having brought him the news of the French presence at Frasnes:

“Le général de Constant auquel je fis rapport avait de la peine de croire tout ce que je lui disais c'est surtout l'abandon de la route de Charleroi à Bruxelles par les Prussiens qui lui paraissait peu probable. Voici la réponse verbale qu'il me chargea de donner au général Perponcher: “[...] Si la rapport que vous m'avez fait est exact, le Duc de Wellington doit déjà être informé de ces événements, par le maréchal Blücher, il ne tardera pas de prendre les mesures en conséquence. [...]”⁷⁷

What made this lack of communication even worse was the most defective state of communication of the Prussian communication system. Within the Prussian army, the best example in this were two orders carried from Namur to Von Bülow, which took more as two times the normal time it would have taken to bring them over.

With just the important communications of Zieten and Blücher to Wellington, the same thing happened. Of the first one, it took nine hours to cover the distance of 50 kilometers which normally could have been done in five to six hours, while the second one took about ten and a half hours for a distance of 63 kilometers, a distance which could normally be covered within six to seven hours. It has never been explained how these delays could occur and I haven't found a clear clue either, but by carefully comparing all existing sources I cannot come to another conclusion that both were delayed very considerably, which was just in this situation most fatal.⁷⁸

The Prussians, and then Zieten in particular, have been reproached for not reporting back to Wellington in time about the evacuation of the Brussels road.⁷⁹ Yet, from what is known of Zieten's report dated 9 a.m. this document can be considered as such a report as it was in this that he announced his slow retreat upon Fleurus, so as to gain time for the army to concentrate further east.

In his turn, Von Steinmetz sent the news he had to his superior, Von Zieten, and initially also to Van Merlen, but this took place within the same context: Zieten would take the transmission over from there and he, in his turn, to Gneisenau.

Even though the concentration of the Prussian army must have required all attention of the Prussian general staff, it cannot be a full excuse for not having informed Wellington of the complete evacuation of the Brussels road.

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¹ Pflugk Harttung, J.von In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI.nr.II.12.p.17-18 and II.11.p.15-18

² Reiche, L.von Memoiren Vol.II p.157

³ Von Pflugk Harttung believes it was 5 a.m. or 5.30 at the most, but I believe it could not have been earlier due to the delay. The anonymous officer of the 6th regiment of uhlans claims it was 6 a.m. that he heard them.

Colonel Von Stack believes it was 5 a.m.

Report of colonel Von Stack, 1st WestPrussian regiment of infantry nr.6. In: KA, VI.E.7.II.63, in: GSA, VPH-HA, VI nr. VII.3C.p.3

⁴ Cf. J.von Pflugk Harttung in: GSA, VPH-HA, VI, nr.II.11.p.7-10, 54-71 and II.12.p.45-48 and II.5.p.22-23

⁵ Colonel Von Stach, of the 1st WestPrussian regiment of infantry nr.6 (Pirch II) claims that the 2nd battalion of his regiment left Marchienne-au-Pont the moment it got a note that the 1st brigade fell back from Fontaine l'Évêque and that it was at the same height as Marchienne-au-Pont. This may have been, but this must then not have been the case for the whole brigade. In: Steinmetz, major Von Beleuchtung etc. p.43

According to Von Pflugk Harttung this note came from the flank detachment of Von Hoffmann, so not from Von Steinmetz himself, therefore the confusion. The moment the French entered Marchienne-au-Pont, the right wing of Von Steinmetz would have been at Carnières, north west of Fontaine l'Évêque. In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI nr.II.5.p.22

A report about the 2nd brigade claims that it received the order to fall back to a position near Gilly after it had become clear that Thuin and Montigny-le-Tilleul had been evacuated. In: Report about the 2nd brigade. In: KA, VI.E.7.I.64 in: GSA, VPH-HA, VI. nr. VII.3c.p.29

⁶ Major general Von Steinmetz confirms in his report that the French had reached Jumet even before he himself had crossed the Piéton. In: KA, VI.E.7.I.26 and VI.E.II.18 in: GSA, VPH-HA, VI, nr. VII, 3B p.5

⁷ Cf. J.von Pflugk Harttung in: GSA, VPH-HA, VI, nr.II.11.p.15-53

⁸ Cf. J.von Pflugk Harttung in: GSA, VPH-HA, VI, nr.II.11.p.29-35 and II.12.p.18-24, 31-33 and II.10.p.8-9

⁹ The 1st Westprussian regiment of dragoons would not have fulfilled its duties; this is based upon a report of Zieten in which he expresses his discontent over it. He urged to have an inquiry as to make sure whether the regiment could claim any decorations and honours. Blücher, in his report dated 16th august 1815 to the Prussian king, expresses the same discontent, but not having the records in my hands, I cannot draw solid conclusions. In: Pflugk Harttung, J.von In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI, nr.II.11.p.28

¹⁰ Lettow Vorbeck, O.von – Napoleons Untergang p.246

¹¹ Von Pflugk Harttung, J.von In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI nr.II.12.p.51-52 and in II.11.p.4-5

¹² Von Pflugk Harttung, J.von In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI nr.II.11.p.12

¹³ Von Pflug Harttung, J.von In: GSA, VPH-HA,VI nr.II.11.p.47-53 and II.12.p.40-41

¹⁴ Aerts, W. Etudes etc. p.298

Lettow Vorbeck, O.von Napoleon's Untergang p.257

¹⁵ Hofschröder, P. 1815. The Waterloo campaign. Wellington etc. p.182

¹⁶ Pirch II claims some French light troops occupied it, but that it was retaken later by Prussian cavalry of the reserve. Cf. his report in KA.VI.E.7.I.64 in GSA, VPH-HA,VI, nr.II.6.p.4

The fact that it was taken by the French is confirmed by Zieten in his report dated 8th July 1815. In: Reiche, L.von Memoiren p.416

¹⁷ One source erroneously claims that the French presence at Ransart caused Pirch II to leave his position near Gilly and Von Steinmetz at Heppignies. Cf. Briefe eines Preussischen Offiziers etc. In: MWB, 1822 p.461

¹⁸ Cf. the French plan of attack. Also see Zieten's report dated 8th July 1815. In: Reiche, L.von Memoiren p.416

¹⁹ Pflug Harttung, J.von In: GSA,VPH-HA,VI, nr.II.11.p.71-72 and II.12.p.48-49

²⁰ Pflug Harttung, J.von In: GSA,VPH-HA,VI, nr.II.12.p.49

²¹ Reiche, L.von Memoiren Vol.II p.169

²² Pflug Harttung, J.von In: GSA,VPH-HA,VI, nr.II.12.p.52-54 and II.11.p.73-77

²³ Pflug Harttung, J.von In: GSA,VPH-HA,VI, nr.VI.p.6-8

²⁴ Cf. the official Prussian report. In: Bas, F.de La campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.444

²⁵ Blücher to the Prussian king, at 11.30 p.m. on the 15th of June.

The information coming from Prussian general headquarters as referred to by lieutenant general Stewart in his letter of the 19th of June is in my opinion in the same line of thinking: the impression was that the enemy apparently tried to force the centre between both allies' armies; there is no allusion yet to a great battle between the French and the Prussians. The option is still left open: if Napoleon would not move on the 16th, the allies would, crushing Napoleon's army between them.

Hofschröder explains the meaning of this letter in events which followed later on the 16th of June, i.e. the hope of the Prussians in the battle of Ligny to maintain their position on the 16th of June, while receiving aid from Wellington and / or Von Bülow to finish Napoleon off. In this sense, it is projecting the battle of Ligny into events which were still to take place. In: 1815. The Waterloo campaign. Wellington etc. p.190

²⁶ See below, for the role of Von Bülow in the general idea of the Prussian general staff for a battle near Ligny.

²⁷ For instance, Blücher writes to the king by 11.30 p.m. on the 15th of June: "Das 2. Und 3. Armeekorps werde ich morgen früh hier bei Sombreffe vereinigen, wohin auch bis morgen Nachmittag das 4.Armeekorps kommen kann." Contrary to the 2nd and 3rd corps, for the 4th

corps no order has been given yet for Sombreffe; it is a possibility that it could reach that place in the afternoon, after having been instructed to do so.

And Gneisenau to Pirch I and Zieten: “Bülow rückt morgen (16) nach Gembloux” and “das 4. Armeekorps marschiert nach Gembloux”. So, on the late evening of the 15th of June, no mention is made of Sombreffe yet for the 4th corps. Cf. Gneisenau’s order to Zieten of 3 a.m.

²⁸ From the order to Zieten dated 11 p.m. it can be seen that the Prussian central command expresses doubts whether Pirch I would be able to reach Sombreffe by daybreak on the 16th of June.

²⁹ Also see the communication with Wellington.

³⁰ Cf. Pflugk Harttung, J.von In: GSA.VPH-HA.VI,nr.VII.nr.4 p.1-4

³¹ This chapter about the situation of Von Bülow’s corps on the 15th and 16th of June is largely based upon the work of J.von Pflugk Harttung. In: Vorgeschichte etc. p.252-265, 361-375

³² Von Valentini says about this order: “[..] sein Korps [..] in engere Quartiere zu legen, so dass es sich in einem Marsch bei Hannut konzentrieren könne [...]” Here it is suggested as if an inner concentration of the 4th corps was meant, while actually one of brigades was meant, so that Hannut could be reached within a short period of time. Cf. Valentini, Von In: Lehre vom Kriege Vol.II p.327-329

Cf. Pflugk Harttung, J.von Vorgeschichte etc. p.369

Von Pflugk Harttung erroneously believes the order was issued in the afternoon and that it therefore took about 16 hours to get it to Liège as it was delivered to Von Bülow about 5 a.m. on the 15th of June. The reason for this huge delay should according to Von Pflugk Harttung be looked for in the defective organisation of the conveyance of messages within the Prussian army. Cf. Von Pflugk Harttung. In: GSA,VPH-HA, VI, nr.VII.4.p.1-4

³³ Hofschröder, P. 1815.The Waterloo campaign. Wellington etc. p.220-221
Hussey, J. The anniversary of Marengo etc. p.30

³⁴ Cf. Von Reiche. In: Memoiren Vol.II p.196
Also see: Nostitz, colonel Von. Das Tagebuch etc. p.20

³⁵ Cf. Anonymous. In: History of the war etc. In: MWB, 1845 p.19
Varnhagen von Ense, K.A. Leben etc. p.412

³⁶ Cf. Pflugk Harttung, J.von. In: GSA.VPH-HA,VI,nr.II.13.p.1-2
Cf. account of major Ritz (see above).

³⁷ In: GSA,VPH-HA, VI. Nr.II.13.p.3

³⁸ Account of Von Below. In: Pflugk Harttung, J.von Vorgeschichte etc. p.367
According to Von Nostitz, Von Bülow would have reported to Blücher - after having received the first order - that he expected to arrive at Hannut on the 16th of June. This report would have reached the fieldmarshall at Sombreffe. It is, however, the second order which Von Nostitz refers to. In: Das Tagebuch etc. p.20

³⁹ Cf. Von Nostitz. Das Tagebuch etc. p.20

Von Lettow Vorbeck. Napoleon's Untergang p.281

Hamilton-Williams, D. Waterloo. New perspectives etc. p.150

History of the war etc. In: MWB, 1845 p.26

Pollio, A. – Waterloo p.128

Von Ollech. Geschichte etc. p.91 He even gives an alternative version for the actual order. It reads: "Auf Befehl Sr.Durchlaucht des Fürsten Blücher führen Ew.Excellenz Ihr Korps sogleich von Lüttich nach Hannut und find dort der weiteren Verwendung mit den anderen Korps nach Sombreffe oder Namur, gegen die wahrscheinlich im Anmarsch begriffene feindliche Armee gewärtig."

⁴⁰ Cf. Von Bülow's letter to Gneisenau, dated 15th June.

Account of Von Below. In: Pflugk Hartung, J.von Vorgeschichte etc. p.367

⁴¹ Cf. Von Valentini. Lehre vom Kriege Vol.II p.327-329

It is in this context that Von Gneisenau complains about Von Valentini in a letter dated 25th June 1815 to Boyen. For him, he would be too formal and would take into account the physical aspects of the men too much, i.e. that he would be too soft for the men. In: Delbrück, H. Das Leben etc. p.539-541

⁴² Account of Von Below. In: Pflugk Hartung, J.von Vorgeschichte etc. p.367

Clausewitz, Von - Hintellassene Werke etc. p.36

⁴³ Varnhagen von Ense, K.A. Leben etc. p.412-413

⁴⁴ Cf. Von Bülow's letter to Gneisenau, dated 15th June.

Account of Von Below. In: Pflugk Hartung, J.von Vorgeschichte etc. p.367

⁴⁵ In: KA, VI.C.3.II.p.31 in GSA, VPH-HA, VI, nr.VII.6.p.9

Pflugk Hartung, J.von. Vorgeschichte etc. p. 259

For the same absence, also see: History of the war etc. In: MWB, 1845 p.23 Here the presence at Hannut of quartermasters were present, no officers of Von Bülow's staff.

⁴⁶ Colonel Von Nostitz claims he proposed to Gneisenau to send a copy of this third order to Liège as well, in case Von Bülow would not be at Hannut, but this proposal would have been rejected. It is possible that he did so, but it is highly coincidental that Von Nostitz would have done so: I have the impression as if Von Nostitz wants to do a better job as Gneisenau did at the time and as if he was clairvoyant himself. He obviously writes from hindsight. In: Das Tagebuch etc. p.19

⁴⁷ According to lieutenant Von Below two orders stranded at Hannut, but he is wrong. It was only the one of the late morning of the 15th of June; the other one was an oral one, which was transmitted by Von Roth and he proceeded towards Liège. In: Vorgeschichte etc. p.367

Part of the problem was according to Von Lettow Vorbeck that it would have been better to use officers to convey important documents or messages, instead of simple messengers. In: Napoleon's Untergang p.281

⁴⁸ Cf. Register of staff. Nr.253 In: GSA. VPH-HA, VI nr.VII.nr.6 p.5 The note literally states: Gl.Bülow. Ueber Konzentrierung bei Hannut.

⁴⁹ According to Von Lettow Vorbeck it was the report of Zieten which reached Gneisenau between 2 and 3 p.m. In: Napoleon's Untergang p.280

⁵⁰ In: History of the war etc. In: MWB,1845 p.23

⁵¹ Cf. O.von Lettow Vorbeck. He believes Von Bülow was expected at Gembloux by 10 a.m. He has probably taken this from Von Conrady.

In Lettow's idea, the reason for Gneisenau to send Roth out would have been the arrival of Zieten's report of 1.30 p.m. about the loss of Charleroi. In: Napoleon's Untergang p.275-280 Cf. Conrady, E.von Leben und Wirken etc. Vol.II p.297

⁵² Pflugk Harttung, J.von Vorgeschichte etc. p.371-372

⁵³ Cf. History of the war etc. In: MWB, 1845 p.22

⁵⁴ Von Roth actually writes in his report: "Euer Hochwohlgeb. Befehl zu folge habe ich mich auf das Schleunigste hierher begeben, um mich der mündlichen Befehle an den Herrn General Grafen Von Bülow zu entledigen. "

⁵⁵ Conrady, Leben etc. p.295
Pflugk Harttung, J.von Vorgeschichte etc. p.373-374

⁵⁶ Delbrück claims that Blücher initially did not want the 1st corps to fall back into the position of Sombreffe because of the approach of Wellington. In what way, he doesn't explain, but for the reason as I have given I see no such relation. In: Das Leben etc. Vol.IV p.371

⁵⁷ Ziethen was informed some nine hours later.
Cf. Pollio, A. – Waterloo p.165

⁵⁸ Cf. Hussey, J. The anniversary of Marengo etc. p.29
Hussey qualifies the omission as "one of the overlooked curiosities of this night."

⁵⁹ In: KA, VI.C.3.II.p.51 in GSA,VPH-HA, VI, nr.VII.6.p.10

⁶⁰ Von Damitz claims a second letter was sent by Blücher to Von Müffling somewhere in the afternoon and which would have reached Brussels in the evening. It would have contained further information about the enemies strength and the loss of the Sambre-bridges.

In: Geschichte etc. p.103

Its text has not been preserved, but I do not believe this letter ever existed as it is not being mentioned in the register of staff.

Cf. Pflugk Harttung, J.von Die preussische Berichterstattung etc. p.58

In total, Von Damitz claims four letters were sent by the Prussians to Wellington that day, one from Von Steinmetz (but this was addressed to Van Merlen), one from Von Zieten and two from the general staff. I also come to four in this sense, but the fourth one is the one written around 11 p.m.(see above)

Hofschröer describes this second report of Blücher as one "confirming that the entire Prussian army was moving to concentrate on Sombreffe" and as arriving at 10 p.m. For this statement he uses the memoirs of Von Müffling and the version of Von Damitz, which is completely different, however.

The description does match the one from Von Müffling though, but it is not another message from Blücher to Von Müffling which is meant here, and that it is the one from noon and which arrived at Brussels between 9.30 and 10 p.m. and which Hofschröder erroneously situates as arriving before 6 p.m.

In: 1815. The Waterloo campaign. Wellington etc. p.213

⁶¹ Cf. letters written by Blücher to Schwarzenberg and the Prussian king and those of Gneisenau to Zieten and Von dem Knesebeck.

There is a letter written by lieutenant general lord Stewart, dated 19th of June at Heidelberg, to a British diplomat, Mr. Taylor, in which he writes from a report of the Prussian army, but from whom this had come is not clear. From the letter it becomes clear that it was probably written on the late evening of the 15th of June, and one would think it would have been Blücher's report to Schwarzenberg, dated 10 p.m. but Stewart refers to the impression the Prussian staff had that Wellington might be concentrating at Soignies. And this is a specific detail which is not mentioned by Blücher. This might be an indication that another report was sent out to Heidelberg by the Prussian staff, but what kind of message this might have been is not clear as there is no mention of this in the register of staff.

In: BL, Add.ms.20.114 f.112

Cf. Hofschröder, P. 1815. The Waterloo campaign Wellington etc. p.189

⁶² Pedlow, G. Back to the sources etc. p.30-36

Hussey, J. At what time on 15 June 1815 did Wellington learn of Napoleon's attack on the Prussians? In: War in history 6 (1999), nr.1 p.88-116

Julius von Pflugk Harttung also deals with the subject very extensively in his article "Die Berichterstattung etc. "

⁶³ Cf. Von Grolmans letter to Zieten dated 19th January 1819. In: KA. In: GSA, VPH-HA,VI nr.VII.2.p.1

⁶⁴ Cf. Pflugk Harttung, J.von Die preussische Berichterstattung etc. p.44 The original letter was in the KA, VI.E.7.II.p.2 and Grolman's request in the same file p.1

⁶⁵ In: Hafner, D. Hans Carl Ernst Graf von Zieten etc. In: Militarisches p.252-253

⁶⁶ Cf. Hussey, J. At what time etc. p.104

⁶⁷ In: Hafner, D. Hans Carl Ernst Graf von Zieten etc. In: p.328

Hussey also sees the document as an exercise in self-exculpation. In: At what time etc. p.104

⁶⁸ In: Pfister, A. Aus dem Lager der Verbündeten p.366

⁶⁹ Hofschröder, P. Waterloo. The Waterloo campaign etc. p.193-194

In this particular case, he has the messenger use four hours to cover the stretch Charleroi – Brussels (50 kilometers), while the supposed report as sent out by Zieten at midnight on the 14th of June would have taken seven hours to reach Brussels. Cf. chapter on 14th of June. Bas, F.de La campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.375

Ollech mentions a similar report, without specifying the time of arrival. In: Geschichte etc. p.96

Charras does not mention a report of Zieten as such, but claims Wellington got news from Charleroi by 9 a.m. He has probably taken this from Wellington's letter to the duke of Feltre. In: Histoire de la campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.130

⁷⁰ In this sense the claim that "Zieten had no news to report at 9.a.m. and if he had, he would surely have reported it to Blücher, and not just to Brussels" is unfounded as Zieten did have something report about at the same time, i.e. at 8.15 to Blücher first and then, right after, to Wellington and that is the news Zieten refers to and which he could have earlier as by 8 a.m. Cf. Hofschröder, P. Yet another reply etc. p.287

To quote Hofschröder again, if Zieten would have written a report a 9 a.m. "then surely that message would have contained the latest news, namely the fall of Thuin and the French advance to the outskirts of Charleroi, and not news several hours old, namely of the French attack on Thuin and apparent threat to Charleroi that had started at daybreak" – Hofschröder uses this phrase to prove that Zieten did *not* send a report to Wellington by 9 a.m. but this is just what he *did* report about at 9 a.m. as I indicated above.

⁷¹ Cf. Zieten in his letter from 1819 (see above).

⁷² Cf. Hussey, J. At what time etc. p.95

⁷³ Hofschröder claims Zieten wrote another report for Von Müffling at 11 a.m., just before the evacuation of Charleroi. He mentions Hafner as his source (p.253), but in this publication Zieten himself doesn't mention such a report, and in my mind therefore such a report has never existed.

In: 1815.The Waterloo campaign. The German victory p.330 and 1815.The Waterloo campaign. The German victory p.330

Did the duke of Wellington etc. p.186

For him, using Von Müffling's memoirs, this report reached Von Müffling by 3 p.m., but this is where Von Müffling actually refers to the report of Zieten informing him of the hostilities. In reality, however, this was later in time (probably around 5.30 p.m.).

As a result, Hofschröder runs into trouble with his chronology by stating that when Von Müffling got the supposed note of 11 a.m. from Zieten about the loss of Charleroi, he had not been informed by Wellington of the report Zieten would have written to him towards 5 a.m. Wellington "considering the message unimportant."

Considering a message which contains the outbreak of a war, as being the attack on the partner army, of which the representative himself in Wellington's army was not informed, is in my mind an absurd assumption and, again, is one of the examples of the inconsistencies in the theory of the deception of Blücher by the duke of Wellington (cf. my observations at the end of the chapters on the 16th of June).

In: Hofschröder, P. 1815. The Waterloo campaign. The German victory p.334

⁷⁴ Pflugk Harttung, J.von Die preussische Berichterstattung etc. p.55 and GSA, VPH-HA,VI, nr.II.12.p.98

One year before he came to this conclusion (in 1903) he still believed Zieten did actually write a first report by 5 a.m. (and which would have arrived in Brussels by 9 a.m.). In: Die Vorgeschichte der Schlacht bei Quatre Bras (from 1902) p.199

There has been a discussion between Hofschröder and Hussey on the interpretation of Von Pflugk Harttung relating of the time Zieten sent his report to Brussels. Within this discussion, however, no particular reference is made to the change of opinion Von Pflugk Harttung went through, in the sense as I noted above. Cf. Hofschröder, P. 1815. The Waterloo campaign. The German victory p.334 and in “Zieten’s message to Wellington. 4.45 etc.” and in “Yet another reply etc.” p.288

Lettow Vorbeck sees two reports, one of 5 a.m. and the other of 8.15 a.m. While he does not specify the time of arrival of the first one, he sets the second one on a time between 5 and 6 p.m. (which was not the first news, which actually came in through the prince of Orange). Lettow Vorbeck doesn’t regard the first report as one dealing with the beginning of the hostilities. In: Napoleon’s Untergang p.283-284

F.de Bas also has Zieten write two reports, at 5 a.m. and 8.15 a.m., arriving at Brussels at 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. respectively. In: La campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.375

Wagner (1825) claims Zieten sent out a report through a “Feldjäger” at 4 a.m. to Wellington about the French offensive. Apart from the fact that this is an error, at the same time he refers to this report only, no more. It may be that Wagner bases himself on the letter as written by Zieten in 1819. Wagner used for his work reports from the Kriegsarchiv and of several eyewitnesses, but he gives no references for his assertions. In: Plane etc. p.vi (introduction)

⁷⁵ Pflugk Harttung, J.von In: Vorgeschichte der Schlacht bei Quatre Bras p.217

⁷⁶ It was already in the order of the 5th of May that Zieten had been instructed by Blücher to concentrate at Fleurus and at the same time “[...] eine genaue Verbindung mit der Anglo-Batavischen Armee fortdauerend zu unterhalten [...]” Cf. preambles.

⁷⁷ VLS, nr.II nr.3.3

⁷⁸ Pflugk Harttung, J.von In: GSA. VPH-HA.VI, nr.4 p.3

It took about 10 hours to get Blücher’s letter (dated noon) to Brussels, while it took about 10 hours as well for the messenger of the letter of 11 p.m. to reach Wellington, while traveling a much shorter distance (not the one from Namur to Brussels, but from Sombreffe to Genappe).

⁷⁹ Cf. Hussey, J. – The Frasnes letter, a reconsideration etc. p.16