

The battle of Ligny: observations.

The French.

I have described the plan Napoleon had in mind for the destruction of the Prussian army just before he started the battle.

In fact, the principle of the idea had been laid down far earlier that morning, which was that Ney had to place a division at Marbais, just in case Napoleon would need it on his right wing in conjunction with the operations of Grouchy towards Sombreffe. As by then Napoleon of course wasn't aware of an imminent Prussian concentration and as he presumed he would meet a relatively small number of Prussian forces, the idea was taken up that afternoon, but now on a far larger scale (Ney's wing) in relation to the larger number of Prussian forces involved. This element formed part of strategy of the central position: to use (part of) the other wing to enlarge the reserve so as to strike a decisive blow on one of the opponents.

From the order written by Soult at 2 p.m. for Ney a few things become clear. First of all, by the time it was written Napoleon was aware that Ney actually had some enemy forces in front of him which had to be driven away before he could actually take up a position at Quatre Bras. His presence there was no longer taken as a matter of course, as it was in the instructions issued in the morning.

In this idea, although it is not stated explicitly, what is asked from Ney is, after having forced Wellington back, to leave a force opposed to him and for Ney to move with the remainder of his forces towards Napoleon.

At the same time, Napoleon did not rule out the chance that he might beat the Prussians without Ney's aid and that he could move towards Ney so as to support him in his turn after all. This, in turn, had to do with the impression Napoleon had of Blücher's strength at that time of the day. Soult speaks of a "corps de troupes" and in relation to what Napoleon expected that morning this force may have been in Napoleon's mind about 40 to 50,000 men.

This last point is of importance as it is a different starting point as the one phrased in the order of 3.15 p.m.

While Napoleon ordered Ney at 2 p.m. to attack the enemy at Quatre Bras, take the crossroads and then wheel to the right to fall upon the Prussian rear, by 3.15 p.m. no such complications were taken into account. By the time this second order would reach Ney, Napoleon simply expected him to be at Quatre Bras, or possibly about to move along the Namur-road towards Marbais.¹

It is important to note why the order was sent just then, at 3.15 p.m.; there must have been a compelling reason for Napoleon to do so just then. By that time Napoleon could not expect Ney to appear at the battlefield of Ligny, as by that time the messenger of the order of 2 p.m. was still on his way.

It was most probably a combination of circumstances. By 2 p.m., Blücher had the 1st and 2nd corps in the area between Sombreffe – Trois Burettes – Bry – Saint Amand and Ligny, while the 3rd corps was still on the Namur road east of Sombreffe. As Napoleon turned his front line as a preparation for battle, this 3rd Prussian corps emerged from this position, occupying positions opposite the French right flank. By that time, Napoleon had a much clearer impression of what force he was facing. Was it in the first order "un corps de troupes", now it was "cette armée".²

Additionally, obviously, the battle had started by the attacks upon both Saint-Amand and Ligny. Further, there is a good chance that Lobau's report reached Napoleon between 2 and 3.15 p.m. and this report informed Napoleon in more recent detail about Ney's situation, thereby inciting him into urgency.

And this is what the order breathes: urgency and determination. Initially, Napoleon did not exclude that he could move towards Ney himself if he would have finished off with Blücher before Ney would have driven Wellington away from Quatre Bras, he now realized the situation had changed, giving him the chance to finish off with Blücher. Ney's role now became an even more important tool for a decisive victory and that is why there could only be one option: an immediate and vigorous manoeuvre by Ney along the Namur road on the Prussian rear between Brye and Sombreffe and this was phrased by Soult in the strongest terms.³ Realising the situation, the occasion was seen by Napoleon as *the* moment to destroy the majority of the Prussian army.

In the original plan for the battle as it has been sketched, the decision in favour of the French had to come from two components: Ney's manoeuvre on the one hand and Napoleon's piercing of the Prussian line with (part of) his reserve on the other. Therefore, timing of both was essential. This brings up the question of when Napoleon expected Ney to arrive near Marbais, at least there where he would start to influence the Prussian positions. In other words, it is the question in what way the plan as phrased at 2 p.m. was feasible in Napoleon's mind.

Taking into account the orders as he sent them in the morning and a slight resistance of Wellington's forces at the crossroads of Quatre Bras, it could be expected that Ney's forces started to move between 11 a.m. and noon and that the majority of them could be at Quatre Bras by the time the order of 2 p.m. would reach Ney; this could be towards 4 p.m. From this point onwards, and taking into account the distance between Quatre Bras and Marbais, it could be between 6 and 6.30 p.m. that Ney could show up near the latter village. All in all, a neat timing when it comes down to the convergence of Ney's and Napoleon's manoeuvres.⁴

Yet, if by the time Ney would have to make a similar manoeuvre after having received the order dated 3.15 p.m. it would have been a very tight schedule as in that case, if all went smoothly, it could not be before 7.30 / 8.00 p.m. that Ney could reach Marbais.⁵⁻⁶

Towards the time Napoleon may have expected Ney to arrive and he was making his preparations to launch his reserve (5.30 p.m.), his attention was distracted by the appearance of an unknown force on the far left. As it appeared, this was the 1st French corps approaching, but not on the instigation of Napoleon.

It forced him to take measures to prevent it from drawing too near in case it might be an enemy's column and thereby delaying the intervention of his reserve. More importantly, as a result of the appearance of the 1st corps, Napoleon was forced to use parts of his reserve prematurely and on a different frontline as had planned it, thereby leaving just a part of it for the assault upon Ligny.

Meanwhile, Blücher had weakened his position between Ligny and Sombreffe, by drawing most of his reserves to his right wing (see below).

Ultimately, the fact that this happened must have been the reason for Napoleon to push through the other component of his initial plan during the battle and that was to pierce the Prussian front-line at Ligny.

Napoleon did not consider to turn the Prussians on their right flank (which was open) by Wagnelée as he felt Ney's manoeuvre would be far more efficient by coming down from Marbais as the hammer on the Prussian right rear, while using his own forces on the hooked frontline of Saint-Amand-la-Haye, Saint Amand and Ligny as the anvil.⁷

Von Clausewitz follows this criticism as this manoeuvre would have allowed Napoleon to drive the Prussians away from Wellington.⁸ He believes Ney's role was not a vital component in the battle as it was doubtful whether he actually could join in in time. In all this, however, Von Clausewitz doesn't take into account the fact that Napoleon - during the first

hours of the battle - was confident that Ney would join in in time. He simply fails to appreciate the immense importance which Napoleon attached to Ney's role in the battle on the one hand and his conviction about the feasibility of the manoeuvre on the other.⁹

Another reason for Napoleon - in Von Clausewitz' idea - to move around the Prussian right flank could have been the possible arrival of Von Bülow at Point du Jour during the afternoon of the 16th of June. This may be true; but how could Napoleon know about Von Bülow's absence and, what is even more important, from where would he approach the battlefield?¹⁰

It has also been asserted that Napoleon intended, by attacking Saint Amand and Ligny, to draw as many of the Prussian reserves as possible towards and into these villages away from the frontline between Ligny and Sombreffe, so that he could pierce it there.

On the contrary, it was just part of the original plan as designed before the battle started as a way of drawing in more Prussian forces and to tie them down there, so as to be ready for the "coup de grâce" as to be dealt by Ney's forces and the French reserve.

Additionally, the fact that it actually took place was not only caused by the French plan in the first place, but also by the Prussian actions which resulted from the original Prussian plan (see below).

Formally, Grouchy was in command of the right wing, consisting of the 3rd and 4th corps of infantry, plus the cavalry corps of Pajol and Exelmans, but as the situation at Ligny developed into a full-scale battle, where Napoleon himself was present, obviously it was the emperor himself who took the command. This meant that on the right wing, Grouchy was back to his command over the cavalry.

In his own words, he had the task "de se fondre avec les corps des troupes à cheval des généraux Pajol et Exelmans sur la nombreuse cavalerie que les prussiens avaient placée à leur gauche, de la forcer à se retirer au-delà de Sombref [sic], et d'occuper la sortie de Namur par laquelle arrivaient les renforts qui venaient joindre le maréchal Blücher."¹¹

If this really would have been the mission of Grouchy, then he has failed in every respect. It suggests a strong offensive role directed towards the Namur-road, so as to force the Prussians in Grouchy's front behind Sombreffe and in this way to block any other Prussian forces coming from the east to assist the forces present in the area between Brye, Ligny and Saint Amand.

First of all, Grouchy played a defensive role during the battle and in this role there is not the slightest sign of any offensive action whatsoever, apart from the one which was the result of the short offensive movement of Thielmann in the evening.

It would also have meant that Grouchy would have needed infantry to push towards the position of Point du Jour. However, the only infantry which could have done so, the division of Hulot, remained stationary in front of this position and wasn't attached to Grouchy's forces either.¹² If Napoleon really intended to make a strong offensive movement towards Point du Jour, he would have arranged his forces in a different way.

It is therefore from the order of battle of Grouchy's forces and the way they were involved in the battle that I conclude that Grouchy's version of his role is highly incorrect, and it remains a mystery why he describes it in the way he did, as it could only undermine the assessment of his role in the battle.

On the French right wing, the forces of Maurin and Hulot were clearly posted to secure Gérard's right flank, while those of Exelmans and Pajol must have acted as a screen to demonstrate in front of the Prussian left wing and to secure the remainder of the army against a possible Prussian offensive action here.¹³

Detailed sources about the positions of the French artillery and the way it was handled are virtually non-existent. From the positions of the 3rd and 4th infantry corps, it becomes clear

however that part of their batteries must have been able to give an enfilading fire on the Prussians in rear of Ligny and Saint Amand respectively.

In general, however, the artillery must have been suffering from a shortage of supplies as the parks had been seriously delayed during the day; they reached Châtelet in the evening.¹⁴

In general, however, the French artillery must have been superior and well placed. This in combination with the fact that it gave a concentric fire, it must have been very effective.¹⁵

In the attacks on Saint Amand and Ligny, the absence of a preparatory bombardment is a singular detail.¹⁶

On both his left wing and his centre, Napoleon intended to fight the action as he did: to bind the Prussian units on the line Ligny –Saint-Amand-la-Haye, exhaust them and made them use up their reserves, and then to use his line here as the anvil for the crushing of these troops by the hammer, i.e. the manoeuvre of Ney, as coming from the Namur road.

What basically happened was that the Prussian concept of an offensive on the right wing, presuming of course the villages here being in Prussian hands, helped Napoleon in his concept of how the battle should be fought as this idea of the Prussians grew into almost obsessive proportions, moving away most of their reserves to the Prussian right wing and thereby exposing their centre.

The proportions were such that, eventually (just before he advanced towards the Prussian centre with the reserve), Napoleon had on his left wing about 27.000 men pinning down about 41.000 Prussians, while in Ligny he had 8600 men opposing 19.000 Prussians; on his right wing he had about 10.000 men opposing about 21.000 Prussians.¹⁷

The timing and way, however, the divisions of both the 3rd and the 4th infantry corps were committed into the action is not fully clear, as proper sources are lacking. Yet, it must have been between 3 and 5.30 p.m. that both divisions of Gérard's corps were committed at Ligny, as well as Vandamme's three divisions and the one of Girard on the left wing.¹⁸

The role of Habert's division of the 3rd corps in particular remains a mystery as proper sources are lacking (certainly of the brigade which probably wasn't used against Von Tippelskirch and Von Jürgass initially). The most probable is that it was involved in the actions for Saint-Amand-la-Haye.¹⁹

Very little information is available on the way the actions here were handled by the local commanders, though for those at Ligny there is an indication that a proper command and coordination seems to have been lacking completely.²⁰

On the left wing, the action was - starting from the right in front of Saint Amand - extended to the left towards Saint-Amand-la-Haye, Saint-Amand-le-Hameau and Wagnelée.

As the Prussians put a lot of weight on Saint-Amand-la-Haye in particular, strong French forces were drawn there, like the complete division of Girard, as well as probably parts of the one of Berthézène and of the one of Habert.

Even though Vandamme and Girard were succesful in repelling the Prussian attacks, the impact of the appearance of an apparent enemy's corps in their left rear must have been strong and should not be underestimated. In fact, Girard evacuated Saint-Amand-le-Hameau and parts of the 3rd corps must have started panicking. The situation, however, was soon restored by the Young Guard.

Napoleon handled his cavalry extremely well in the way the battle was designed and in the way it developed.

In the fighting in the villages at the frontline of Saint Amand / Saint-Amand-la-Haye and Ligny, where the cavalry could have no direct role, units were present to support there where necessary (divisions of Domon and Maurin), while at the same time large amounts of other cavalry were

not far off to give extra support if really necessary in case the enemy would make a breakthrough or that the French forces would be forced to fall back too far (Milhaud, Exelmans, Guyot).²¹ On the other hand, the moment Vandamme was wavering after the appearance of the so-called enemy's column to his left rear, no cavalry was sent to block a possible French retreat, but infantry-reinforcements instead so as to secure the infantry immediately in front of Saint-Amand-la-Haye. This probably had to do with the fact that Napoleon wanted to be absolutely sure about a very strong presence of infantry there (as well as at Ligny) so as to lock in the area where the enemy was to be crushed by the forces of Ney, coming from the north-east.

There might have been too much cavalry on the right wing, but at the same time it should be noted that it immobilised the main part of Thielmann's corps. In the worst case, Exelmans' corps (or parts thereof) also might be available for Gérard if really needed.

In fact, what happened was that – when the unknown column appeared at the extreme left flank – Napoleon sent one division of Pajol there, and not one of his ultimate reserve in cavalry, the corps of Milhaud and that of Guyot. Napoleon must have realised that at least a part of Pajol's corps there was no longer necessary on his right wing without impairing the situation there. The specific actions of the corps of Pajol there are obscure; it would have been involved in demonstrations only.²²

From a tactical point of view, the French had a lot in their favour: in their centre was the village of Fleurus which was on a relative high position and from where Napoleon could easily send out his forces. In this, the French position was ideally suited for an offensive approach, in which there was ample space to deploy.²³

And this is what Napoleon did with his reserves which he used sparingly and efficiently. Once the "threat" became clear of the corps which later appeared to be the one of d'Erlon, he detached a mixed force of all arms to his extreme left flank to act as a small army against this threat (like he did at Waterloo against Von Bülow).²⁴ At the same time, his infantry in the actual front-line on the left wing was at its weakest point supported by the part used first for such purposes, the Young Guard (as at Waterloo as well, at Plancenoit).

Meanwhile, he kept forces at hand to strike later in the Prussian centre.

On the 17th of June, Soult wrote to Davout: "*A 8 heures du soir, l'Empereur a marché avec sa Garde; six bataillons de Vieille Garde, les Dragons et Grenadiers à cheval et les cuirassiers du général Delort ont débouché par Ligny et ont exécuté une charge qui a partagé la ligne ennemie. Wellington et Blücher ont eu peine à se sauver. Cela a été comme un effet de théâtre; dans un instant, le feu a cessé et l'ennemi s'est mis en déroute dans toutes les directions.*"²⁵

Though the attack of the French reserve caused the Prussian front to break and the entire Prussian army to fall back, the push upon Ligny and the French advance on the heights of Brye wasn't that powerful as it has been presented. It was certainly not an "effet de théâtre".²⁶

Obviously, the French infantry was broken up and retarded by their advance through Ligny and needed to reform at the foot of the heights beyond the village and had to wait for the cavalry to emerge as well.

Of the squares of the imperial guard only those of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th regiments of grenadiers were charged by the Prussian cavalry.²⁷ This arm was committed in three waves against the French infantry and cavalry.

At least for the cuirassiers of Delort it meant that they were confronted by a Prussian superiority of infantry, cavalry and artillery, and it was in the midst of this that they actually tried to maintain their ground, instead of advancing towards Brye.²⁸ In this, they do not seem to have been supported by the heavy cavalry of the guard and therefore did not have the opportunity to exploit their action, as a shock action, to its full extent. The French superiority in infantry, caused by the arrival of Lobau in front of Ligny, wasn't exploited either.

Eventually, the French advance must have been slowed down that much that it gave the Prussians the time to establish rearguards at Brye and Sombreffe.

This leads me to the issue of the total absence of a strong French pursuit of the Prussian army. After the decisive attack through the very heart of the Prussian army, the French contented themselves in establishing themselves on and around the heights of Brye (cf. positions of the units right after the battle). Yet, for this pursuit, several units would have been available, like the corps of Pajol and the cavalry divisions of Subervie, Domon and Maurin.

These, in their turn, could have been supported by parts of the cavalry of Milhaud and Guyot, as well as by the corps of Lobau further to the rear.

For the reasons of this absence of a pursuit can only be guessed; one of them may have been a kind of complacency which shines through the letter as written by Soult to prince Joseph Bonaparte.

It reads:

En avant de Fleurus, ou en arrière de Ligny, à huit heures et demie du soir, le 16 juin 1815.

L'Empereur vient de remporter une victoire complète sur les armées prussiennes et anglaises réunies sous les ordres du lord Wellington et du maréchal Blücher. L'armée débouche en ce moment par le village de Ligny, en avant de Fleurus, pour suivre l'ennemi.

Je m'empresse d'annoncer cette heureuse nouvelle à Votre Altesse Impériale.

Soult ²⁹

It is claiming a victory which at that time wasn't even completed, let alone on the two opponents, Blücher and Wellington.

As such, the document can only be interpreted as a publicity stunt for those in Paris.

Ligny was a French victory, though not a complete one in which the Prussian army had been annihilated, as it should have been.

The plan (involving Ney) as developed by Napoleon by 2 p.m. shows the flexibility and strategical genius of Napoleon, but it was built on incorrect assumptions and the defects of its non-application were enhanced by the way the battle of Ligny was fought and finalized. ³⁰ Yet, even in this situation of compromise, by piercing the Prussian position only, no extra efforts were done to make the victory more complete as it could have been.

Revised: 30th January 2011 - Copyright © Pierre de Wit

¹ A striking detail of the order of 2 p.m. is that it presumed that Ney himself could still be found at Gosselies (cf. instruction on the back of the order), while by the time it was written it could be expected that Ney was further north. Répécaud. *Napoleon à Ligny etc.* p.31

² Houssaye also sees the difference. In: *1815.Waterloo* p.160

³ A certain degree of melodramatism cannot be denied in this, by the use of the words “Le sort de la France est dans vos mains.”

⁴ At the start of the battle, Napoleon would have said to general Gérard: “Il se peut que dans trois heures le sort de la guerre soit décidé. Si Ney exécute bien ses ordres, il ne s’échappera pas un canon de l’armée prussienne; elle est prise en flagrant délit.” In: *Mémoires pour servir etc.* p.94

Von Clausewitz has his doubts about the cooperation as demanded for in the order of 2 p.m. and sees the request as secondary in the battle-plan, as by then Napoleon would not have known whether Ney was able detach any troops at all. Yet, Napoleon thought he could, as he completely neglected any serious resistance at the crossroads. Further, Von Clausewitz wonders whether the order was in time to be useful; subsequently, he expresses his doubts about its importance. But as such this cannot be a criterium for its importance. At least, for Napoleon it was important, as his idea about Ney’s presence at Quatre Bras was completely different as it in reality was. In: *Hinterlassene Werke etc.* p.68-69

⁵ The distance between Quatre Bras and Marbais is 6 kilometers, while the one between Quatre Bras and Les trois buettes is 8 kilometers. Taking a speed of about 3 to 4 kilometers per hour (being a paved road), the distance could be covered in 2 to 2.5 hours.

⁶ Pollio regards the order dated 3.15 p.m. as a document in which Napoleon “a une vision si claire de la situation présente et de l’avenir et il exprime en peu de paroles une conception si juste, d’une manière si impérative et si militairement élevée, que celui qui le reçut dut en être électrisé. C’est bien le Napoleon de l’histoire et de la légende qui écrit à Ney !” In: *Waterloo* p.223

Grouard also regards the manoeuvre as planned in the order of 3.15 p.m. as too late to be effective in the battle-plan of Napoleon. In: *La critique de la campagne de 1815* p.59-61

⁷ Colonel Haxo, commander of the engineers of the Imperial Guard, claims he tried to convince Napoleon to turn the Prussians on their far right because of the terrain, but Napoleon would have told him he had another plan in mind, without telling Haxo about it, though. In: *Notes de Sismondi etc.* p.374

⁸ Also see: Rogniat, baron *Considérations etc.* p.343

⁹ Uffindell does see the importance of the manoeuvre from Marbais. In: *The eagle’s of triumph* p.189

¹⁰ In: *Hinterlassene Werke etc.* p.67-69

¹¹ In: *Relation de la campagne de 1815* p.15

In another document he cites Napoleon as having ordered him at 1 p.m. “avec les corps de

cavalerie de Pajol et Exelmans vous rejetterez toute la cavalerie de l'aile gauche de l'armée prussienne au-delà de Sombreffe et vous empêcherez les troupes qui arrivent de Namur par la route allant de cette ville aux Quatre Bras d'effectuer leur jonction avec le maréchal Blücher.”

In: Campagne de 1815. Etc. Appendice III p.15

Le maréchal de Grouchy du 16 au 19 juin etc. p.14

Cf. Pascallet, M.E. Notice biographique sur le maréchal Grouchy p.64

This comes down to a similar mission as stated above.

¹² Hulot, E. Documents militaires p.22

¹³ During the small offensive action of Von Thielmann on the road towards Fleurus, at least half of Exelmans' corps must have been very much to the front, in front of Tongrenelle.

¹⁴ Colonel Simon Lorière says it was between 10 and 11 a.m. In: Notes on the 15th and 16th June in SHAT.

¹⁵ Lieutenant colonel Von Röhl, commander of the artillery of the 2nd corps. In: KA.VI, E.15.179 In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI nr.VII nr.5.p.31

¹⁶ Cf. Pollio, A. – Waterloo p.228

¹⁷ In these figures I have taken the following references. Left wing: the 3rd corps, the division of Girard, the division of Subervie and the Young Guard. As the other units of the Imperial Guard here were not involved and not opposed to the Prussians they have not been included. Centre: the divisions of Pécheux and Vichery of the 4th corps. Right wing: the corps of Exelmans and the divisions of Maurin, Hulot and Soult.

Uffindell has done similar calculations for the struggle at Ligny, thereby cutting it into four phases. Apart from the fact that I come out on different figures, I haven't done so as the time the different units on the French side were committed is unknown (apart from the moment the decisive attack was set in, but this one is not included). In: The eagle's last triumph etc. p.210-213

¹⁸ Colonel Fantin des Odoards (22nd regiment of the line, brigade Dupeyroux) of the division doesn't add a lot in this context, only that his regiment (as well as the 70th of the line) was faced with Prussian cavalry. In: Journal etc. p.430-431

¹⁹ According to Charras the second brigade of this division was sent into battle by 5.30 p.m. near Wagnelée. In: Histoire de la campagne etc. Vol.I p.160

²⁰ Francois, Ch. , Journal du capitaine Francois p.880

²¹ At least the division of Delort (Milhaud) was used for this purpose to the left and to the right, but further details are missing. Cf. Delort's report, dated 17th June 1815. In: Stoff, L. Essai etc. p.129-130

²² Castillon de Saint Victor claims the corps was involved in taking Boignée and Balâtre. Cf. Castillon de Saint Victor, M.E.de Historique du 5me régiment de hussards p.104

²³ Pflugk Harttung, J.von In: GSA.VPH-HA.VI, nr.III nr.3.p.53-55

²⁴ It should be noted that the mysterious column was on the horizon between about 5.30 p.m. and about 7.45 p.m. , when it pulled off. It probably was about 6.30 p.m. that Napoleon had learned that it was the corps of d'Erlon; yet, it seems that he left that part of the reserve which he had sent there unemployed.

²⁵ See below.

²⁶ Cf. Bourguet. L'économie des forces etc. p.27

²⁷ General Petit (1st regiment of grenadiers). In: The English Historical Review. Vol.XVIII.1903 p.323

General Christiani (2nd regiment of grenadiers). In: In: d'Avout, A. L'infanterie de la garde à Waterloo. In: Carnet de la Sabretache. 1905. p.111

Colonel Duuring (1st regiment of chasseurs). In: d'Avout, A. L'infanterie de la garde à Waterloo. In: Carnet de la Sabretache. 1905. p.115

28.Cf. Delort in his report to Milhaud, dated 17th june. In: Stoff, L. Essai etc. p.129-130

29.Cf. Copy in register of staff. In: BNP, FR.Nouv.acq.4366

Grouchy, Mémoires Vol.IV p.169

Copy in: SHAT. C15, nr.5

Its messenger was the aide de camp Bécotte (cf the note in the margin of the register of staff).

³⁰ See the observations on the French operations on the 16th of June.