

16th June. The application of strategy of the central position and the *manoeuvre sur les derrières*.

Introduction.

As has been stated before, the very basis of the actions of Napoleon on the 16th of June was formed by the application of the strategy of the central position, and in this case in combination with the *manoeuvres sur les derrières* by the use of the left wing of the army against Blücher later in the day.

The ultimate goal, as it developed, was to hold Wellington at bay, while the bulk of the army would destroy the Prussian army.

The core of Napoleon's strategy for the 16th of June was phrased in one of his orders as: "*Selon les circonstances, j'affaiblirai l'une ou l'autre aile en augmentant ma réserve.*" It was the principle as Napoleon had already sketched it in the morning by requesting for one division at Marbais only to be possibly used on the right wing, but now he applied it on on a far larger scale by involving a major part of the left wing in the same way. This approach found its first formulation in Napoleon's order to Ney dated 2 p.m.

As has been shown, at that time of the day Napoleon saw the left wing as an important instrument to defeat Blücher, while at the same time he did not exclude the possibility that he could beat him himself after all without it. By 3.15 p.m. this impression had changed: what had become a major battle at Ligny, it was then that Ney's aid was asked for in a most vigorous and unambiguous way thereby enabling Napoleon to destroy the Prussian forces.

In the strategy of the central position, Napoleon's reserve on the 16th of June was formed by the imperial guard, the 6th corps and the cavalry corps of Milhaud.

On the early morning of the 16th of June, parts of this reserve such as the 6th corps, the corps of Kellermann and *grand-parc* were still south of the Sambre.

Traditionally, historiography of the campaign of 1815 is focused upon the offensive options of Napoleon on the 16th of June. Of course these are of eminent significance. Yet, these would mean virtually nothing as long as the very basis for the application of the strategy of the central position had not been established and that was the concentration of the complete *armée du Nord* north of the Sambre. That is why those parts of the army which were still south of the Sambre were collected as a priority on its left bank. The significance of this component of the strategy cannot be stressed enough.¹

To seize Brussels was a first target in the campaign as Napoleon launched it, but the question of course depended on whether the allied armies would *allow* him to do so, and it could reasonably be presumed they wouldn't, thereby forcing Napoleon to fight them simultaneously.

For his strategy, Napoleon made sure he equipped both his wings in such a way (about 45.000 men) to make sure he could cope with both opponents on a tactical level at the same time in case they would confront him, while moving his reserve to either one of them, according to circumstances. And this reserve could be his reserve in the strict sense of the word, but also part of the other wing, as he intended to do on the 16th of June.

As the Prussians confronted him on the 15th of June and partly concentrated in front of him the next day, it was there that he moved part of his reserve (the imperial guard and Milhaud's cavalry).

Additionally, Napoleon must have been well aware of the rough strength of the allied armies. He considered his own army higher in quality and therefore he thought he could do with inferior numbers. The formula he used to come to 125.000 men for his *Armée du Nord* as being

sufficient, however, remains obscure. The available time also may have played a role: he had to make sure he would attack the allies before they would invade France by mid-June.

In analyzing the events of the 16th of June, it is vital to note the development of Napoleon's idea about his two opponents in order to understand his reasonings and resulting actions.

The very basis of this development was formed by his idea of a *partial* concentration of both Wellington's and Blücher's armies right in front of his own forces. Because of his own surprise and speed, Napoleon thought he could fall upon part of the enemies armies immediately in front of him, while the remainder was still concentrating. So, eventually, it all had to do with the basic elements of time and space.

For Blücher, Napoleon initially reckoned upon the possible resistance of about 40.000 men, but right after he had started the battle at Ligny, he could convince himself he had a major Prussian force in front of him and he took his chance of destroying it.

There is a common theory which claims that Napoleon was bent upon a battle at Ligny *per se* and then as a battle in which he would involve part of his left wing as coming from Quatre Bras and for which orders to Ney to advance there would already have been issued on the 15th of June. Linked to this theory is the condition that Napoleon would have wished to reach Quatre Bras and Sombreffe simultaneously in order to disrupt allied communication. The theory is the utter example of projection of future events into preceding ones and thereby a most typical product of hindsight. It is the shadow of the battle of Ligny for the French.²

The projection of the future battle of Ligny into the period preceding, however, simply ignores the gradual process Napoleon went through on the morning of the 16th of June in relation to his enemies, and by doing so it misses a point of profound importance. What started as an uncertainty *whether* or *in what force* the Prussians would confront Napoleon evolved into what was to be a full-scale battle in the afternoon. In other words: by the early morning Napoleon could not be fully sure of the concentration of the majority of the Prussian army at Sombreffe, so in that sense there was no question yet of involving the left wing as a reserve in a battle as this took place later in the day.³

Having struck Blücher at the Sambre river, Napoleon considered the chance of a partial Prussian concentration right in front of him as more realistic as one from Wellington.

However, as he could not be sure in what strength Blücher might confront him at Sombreffe or at least west of Gembloux, chances that he could swing back to his left wing as a step towards Brussels were not ruled out. Napoleon even realized this by 2 p.m. on the 16th of June when he was about to attack Blücher, and Ney was taking position at Quatre Bras (at least in the way Napoleon saw it).

In a complementary sense, this would mean that in this case it would be Napoleon to reinforce Ney in his actions along the Brussels road as a stage towards Brussels. What this wants to show is the mere relativity of the integration of the left wing into the right at Ligny, as in practice it could for Napoleon by 2 p.m. still have been the contrary: Napoleon supporting Ney at Quatre Bras, after he had destroyed or pushed back Blücher's force in front of him. That it would not work that way, was not something Napoleon was aware of at that particular moment.

Napoleon's impression of Wellington's forces at and around Quatre Bras developed from an almost complete absence to some weak presence. Initially, in his first orders to Ney, Quatre Bras was just a stage for a march towards Brussels, while by 2 p.m. Napoleon realised that Ney actually had to push back Wellington from the crossroads before being able to take up a position there. For Napoleon, though, this was clearly feasible. He based this idea upon the fact that Wellington could not oppose any serious force against Ney on the one hand, while he supposed that Ney would have his forces well concentrated around Gosselies on the other.

Had Napoleon on the 15th of June still reckoned that Wellington, as coming from Mons, might fall upon his rear, this fear seems to have transformed on the 16th of June into a sense of a slow concentration of Wellington towards the centre of his cantonments, and that only minor forces - as coming from Brussels - would move to protect his extreme left flank.

It were these presumptions which led Napoleon to involve Ney into his confrontation with Blücher and this while Napoleon himself, in his turn, had to face more and more enemy forces in front of him at Ligny.

As these two presumption were incorrect in themselves, the situation was further complicated by several other factors on the left wing.

First of all, Reille's prudence. After the report of Girard, Reille apparently felt uneasy about Prussian forces developing near Saint Amand and this resulted in a delay of his departure towards Frasnes. Reille clearly was aware of his position in relation towards Ney, the more as he had the full power to start his march upon the receipt of imperial orders without having received those of Ney first. On the one hand he took the threat upon his right flank serious, but on the other he minimizes the delay towards Ney in his letter to him of 10.15 a.m. In reality this delay was about one to one and half hours.⁴

Being at Frasnes, Reille also waited for his second division of infantry to come up before actually attacking the allied position at Quatre Bras; by then it was 2 p.m.

The scattered situation of the 1st corps on the morning 16th of June had its roots in what took place the day before. As has been shown, it was by 3 p.m. that day that d'Erlon was ordered to move his corps to the other bank of the Sambre, while securing the river and his flank at Marchienne-au-Pont. Yet, somehow, d'Erlon must have felt uncertain whether he had to move all his forces over the river and the final result was that Soult basically repeated the same order some seven hours later. What made it even worse was that Soult did not react to d'Erlon's first report of 4.30 p.m.; he only did so after his second.

Information at central headquarters about the situation of the 1st corps by dawn on the 16th of June also must have been confusing as it had been d'Erlon himself who had reported on the evening before that his corps was scattered over both sides of the Sambre, while Ney himself had reported not long after that most of the corps stood around Jumet (which obviously wasn't correct).

The result of Soult's orders of the late evening of the 15th of June was that d'Erlon started to pull his units all towards Jumet by dawn on the 16th of June. This took place well into the morning, yet all these efforts were neutralized by d'Erlon's prudence for his left flank a few hours later by his halt at Gosselies.

It has become clear that the time-schedules of the marches of those units south of Jumet of the 1st corps is unclear. Yet, what it does make clear is that d'Erlon's operations seem to have been guided by Soult's order of the 15th of June. Ney's role in the concentration of the 1st corps near Gosselies cannot be fully established, though Soult refers d'Erlon to orders he was to receive from Ney for this concentration. By 7 a.m. he still claimed d'Erlon stood around Jumet, while he must have known from the report of d'Erlon of the late evening before that it wasn't.

This situation touches upon a subject which is directly related to the situation of the left wing: the lack of transparency in the chains of command. For the right wing this was clear: where Napoleon was present in person, the command of this wing of Grouchy was absorbed by the emperor in person.

With Ney, however, this was different. Even long after Ney had received the command of the left wing, both commanders of the 1st and 2nd corps kept reporting to Soult as well.⁵

The time-frame Napoleon used in issuing his orders in combination with the development of the situation at the left wing allowed Wellington to bring up forces onto Quatre Bras,

thoughbeit in a hurried and improvised way. In the way the action developed in front of this crossroads that afternoon, this proved to be a very tight schedule and situation in which he could work his way through and in which, as has been shown, his share of pure luck cannot be denied.

In this action, it should not be forgotten that it was until 4 p.m. that Ney operated under the orders as issued between 8 and 9 a.m.

The order of 2 p.m. comprising the combination of the right and the left wing at Ligny was written in the presumption that it would have been easy for Ney to take a firm position around Quatre Bras by mid-afternoon (if he not already hadn't done so by the time he got the order) and that it would be possible for him to push Wellington well away so as to be able to wheel back towards Napoleon to fall upon the Prussian rear. The fact was, however, that by the time the order reached Ney he was involved in an action from which he could not withdraw just like that.

The situation was even more aggravated by Napoleons order of 3.15 p.m. which unconditionally asked for the same combination as it was presumed by high command that Ney – by the time he would receive this order – was ready to make the manoeuvre as requested. Both these orders made Ney bite himself further into the action at Quatre Bras, as Wellington's forces were increasing and his own success was consequently hanging more and more on a balance.

For Ney, as the *pièce de résistance*, eventually came the unavailability of the 1st corps for the action at Quatre Bras.

From a strictly military point of view, Ney was criticized by Soutl on the 17th of June of not having kept both his corps together. Soutl here clearly refers to the 1st corps as being further south of the 2nd as it should have been.

Late on the evening of the 15th of June, Ney had ordered d'Erlon to pull all his units towards Gosselies, while it had already been Soutl who had done so twice that day. Yet, at the same time, Ney did not inform Soutl correctly by stating that the majority of the 1st corps was at Jumet, while in reality it was only half of it.

D'Erlon started to comply with his orders right away and this resulted in a full concentration of his corps around Jumet (so immediately south of the 2nd corps) most probably by the late morning of the 16th of June. Yet, it was d'Erlon's halt of about one and half hours which undid this situation.

The way Napoleon used his reserve in the morning of the 16th of June is a reflection of what he thought about his enemies: a virtual absence of Wellington upon his left flank and the presence of a part of Blücher's army upon his right. This is why he pulled his guard and Milhaud upon his right wing right from the start. Yet, the corps of Lobau was not parked between both wings but more towards the right, between Charleroi and Fleurus, pending on what would happen further that day.

Sometimes, Napoleon is blamed for not having pulled up the corps of Lobau to the front much earlier that day, and then to the battlefield Ligny in particular. ⁶ I have dealt with this in relation to this battle, but sometimes it is also suggested that Napoleon should have pulled it towards Heppignies, Wangenies or Gosselies to be able to assist at Quatre Bras or Ligny, according to circumstances. ⁷ In strict general strategical terms, this may be right, but to link it to the involvement of Ney later that day in the battle of Ligny is projecting events which were yet to take place (two actions and the marches of the 1st corps between them) into the situation of the morning of the 16th of June.

The fact that Napoleon didn't order it that far in front, as a reserve, is another example of his lack of maximal concentration against the Prussians, and this in turn, is linked to the late

moment in the day that Napoleon realised that he had to deal with them in such a large number.⁸

For Napoleon, the breakpoint in time to pull *both* components of his reserve – the 6th corps and the left wing – towards the battlefield of Ligny came around 3 p.m. For Lobau this destination was Fleurus, and it was not until in the early evening that Napoleon moved his corps to the actual battlefield, but too late to be of any use.

Napoleon clearly didn't expect a major battle with the Prussians later that day, but in theory he superbly developed his plan in the middle of the day to destroy them after all by involving his left wing. But practice chose another course and all this came from and was strengthened by the assumptions and actions, or a lack of them, during the morning of the 16th of June.

The moment Napoleon found out on his side that he had to face the Prussians, as they confronted him, he presumed Ney could help him in his battle plan, but by then Ney was involved in a full action as well. In that, Ney didn't realize that all action at Quatre Bras was of secondary importance and that the decisive battle was raging at Ligny.

However, it was Napoleon himself who had, unwillingly then, sent Ney to Quatre Bras, which had turned into an impasse when the battle of Ligny evolved.

Apart from the fact that it wasn't made clear to Ney by Napoleon that his action was secondary to the one at Ligny [⁹], Napoleon's order of 2 p.m. made it even worse: as the general concept of the situation wasn't explained to Ney, this order had Ney even bite himself into the action at Quatre Bras even further, as in this order the occupation of Quatre Bras was stated as being conditional to a manoeuvre towards Ligny.

In the combination of erroneous presumptions and a lack of coordination, two simultaneous actions arose by which Wellington and Blücher were kept separate, but in which neither of these two confrontations one of these commanders was decisively defeated as it was supposed to be.

At Frasnes, Ney actually prevented Wellington from aiding Blücher, but that was just the issue: he didn't need to be at Quatre Bras to do so.¹⁰ Now, he did and that was an advantage for Napoleon, but that was not what Napoleon wanted later on the 16th: that was the destruction of the Prussian army. But all this was based on Napoleon's wrong idea that Wellington would not concentrate in any force at Quatre Bras at all.

Now he did, and this in combination with Ney's attempt to take the crossroads, fixed Ney as well, thereby failing Napoleon to destroy the Prussians in the way he had planned it. In his later writings, Napoleon still clung on his idea about Wellington's weak presence at Quatre Bras, and therefore did not give Ney credit for what he did at Quatre Bras, in this case taking it from the Anglo-Netherlands-German point of view.¹¹

From the documents available it can be taken that it must probably have been between 7 and 8 a.m. that Napoleon had fully developed his plans for the day.¹² Accordingly, orders were sent out in the next one and a half hours and, as such, the delay wasn't that strong.

It was the late activity on the French right wing which allowed Blücher to concentrate the major part of his army around Sombrefe. The decision to do so was a risky one, so near to the enemy, but the Prussian commander was well aware of the fact that linking up with Wellington gave him the strongest prospects of success.

Underlying the chain of events which occurred later that day, it was this lack of initiative on the French side here on the morning which can be considered as one with the most serious omissions on the 16th of June.

Even recognizing that Napoleon from his side wasn't aware of an imminent Prussian concentration near Sombrefe at all and that, for their part, a major battle was imminent,

Napoleon should have shown much more initiative and aggressiveness in his orientation to his right to be sure about the Prussians being well away from their ally.¹³

Such an approach, right in the very early hours of the 16th of June, would not have allowed Ziethen to fall back behind the Ligne, in fact he would have been on his own and an easy prey for Napoleon.

Briefly, Napoleon should have done everything to prevent Ziethen from concentrating further. By doing so he would have dispersed Ziethen or driven him back probably towards Gembloux, while at the same time, though not knowing immediately himself, he would have prevented the concentration of the other parts of the Prussian army in the position of Sombreffe. In all, it would have necessitated Blücher to concentrate further east, and all this would have ensured a further disruption of the communication between Blücher and Wellington.¹⁴

Of course this delay on the right wing is seen by other historians as well but is, as usual, often directly linked to the battle of Ligny.¹⁵

Even for those who describe the campaign in a pro-Napoleon approach as if his genius hadn't diminished, this delay is hard to understand, but then it is blamed upon his health, the ultimate (and easiest and in fact not controllable) means of explaining things which cannot be logically explained.¹⁶ However, as I have indicated before, as I feel there is no strong proof that Napoleon's health was impaired indeed, this kind of reasoning is all mere conjecture and absolutely useless in the issue.

As with the events on the 15th of June, the delay on the right wing on the 16th of June is explained by others making this wing dependent upon the left wing, as if Napoleon knew by the minute what Ney was doing or not and what he, in his turn, then had to do, or not – as if Ney fully determined the situation on the right wing (and not the other way around, as it should have been).¹⁷

Chances for a strong success were still on Napoleon's side, provided he would use his possibilities for an early and swift advance the next day against Wellington, who was now left on his own at Quatre Bras. It was the continuation of the same principle in the strategy used: as Ney would tie down Wellington at the crossroads, Napoleon would – after sending out a detachment to pursue Blücher - move against Wellington's left flank and rear for a decisive victory.

A final note is on the historiography of the events on the French side on the 15th and 16th of June. Through time, from the very first beginning, this has been suffering from a great deal of projection and hindsight and all this in two levels.

The first is the battle of Ligny, being depicted as the inevitable battle which simply had to take place in the way it did. Secondly, it ranges the *manoeuvre sur les derrières* (as planned during the afternoon of the 16th of June) as something as having existed right from the very beginning of the 16th of June, or even on the 15th of June. In this way, the significance of the French occupation of Quatre Bras grows to enormous proportions.

A most conspicuous detail in this theory therefore becomes the moment when Ney would have been ordered by Napoleon to take position at Quatre Bras. By the very projection of Ney's role into the battle of Ligny, it is just this order which is magnified into immense proportions, while by the time it was actually issued its purpose was for Napoleon meant to be a mere stage in a further march towards Brussels later.¹⁸

This line of thinking not only makes use of the later events in a figurative way, it is also based upon the incorrect presumption that Wellington and Blücher had chosen the concentration points of their armies at Quatre Bras and Sombreffe respectively. At least for Wellington this is most incorrect, as will be shown later.¹⁹

Additionally, projections as those described above suffer from a serious lack of correctness and completeness in the chronology of the events, thereby seriously distorting their sequence. In other cases, events or documents are simply made up.²⁰

In this muddle, elementary subjects – of which each had a specific value in the developments on the 16th of June - are neglected.

By far the most basic one of these is the development Napoleon's idea about his opponents went through during the morning hours of the 16th of June. The immediate transfer of the last bits of the *armée du Nord* towards the left bank of the Sambre in the context of the strategy of the central position on the early morning of the 16th of June is a point of equal importance.

Other points of interest which merit attention and which succumb in this theory of projection and hindsight are the hesitation of d'Erlon about his movements, the concern of central headquarters for the positions of the different divisions of the 1st corps and the flow of information coming from the left wing in general towards central headquarters.²¹

The theory of projection also neglects the more fundamental question of Napoleon affording himself not to create a wider *zone de manoeuvres* on the 15th of June, this in the framework of the strategy of the central position. As has been shown, this most probably had to do with a combination of Napoleon's idea about Wellington's activities (or rather a lack thereof) and his intention to push swiftly towards Brussels. It might have allowed Napoleon to disturb any enemy concentration on his left and right flank, as a step towards further operations for the next day.

The approach of projection and hindsight on the one hand and the incorrect claim on the allied concentration points on the other intensify each other as they run parallel in two geographical points: Quatre Bras and Sombreffe. This still persistent combination has, through its numerous repetition over time, gained an almost unassailable status. As a result, it has prevented and still prevents to see the events in their true proportions and their complex context. For the allies, the strategic dimensions of their cooperation were far larger as those usually portrayed in the theory and at the same time it leaves no room for the gradual development Napoleon went through on the 16th of June in the application of his strategy of the central position.

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¹ On a smaller scale, Napoleon's axioma of keeping one forces concentrated at all times to make sure one would be able to face a possible confrontation either offensively or defensively is expressed in Napoleon's letters to Grouchy on the 16th of June ("Ainsi vous lui donnerez une direction pour qu'il [Gérard] marche d'ailleurs bien réuni et à portée du 3e corps et soit en mesure de concourir à l'attaque de Sombreffe, si l'ennemi fait résistance.") and on the 17th of June ("Dans tous les cas, tenez constamment vos deux corps d'infanterie réunis dans une lieue de terrain, et occupez tous les soirs une bonne position militaire, ayant plusieurs débouchés de retraite."), as well as to Ney on the 17th of June ("L'empereur a vu avec peine que vous n'avez pas réuni hier les divisions; elles ont agi isolément. Ainsi, vous avez éprouvé des pertes.").

² The shadow of this battle in relation to the allies will be dealt with in a following chapter. Some typical examples of this theory of projection are given in a separate note.

³ Delbrück, H. Einiges zum feldzuge von 1815 p.652
Chesney is wrong in his idea that Napoleon doubted on the 16th of June whether he should carry out a direct march towards Brussels against Wellington, or to attack the Prussians. In: Conférences p.181

⁴ Cf. Pontécoulant, F.G. de - Souvenirs militaires p.154
Ney had left for Frasnes and had instructed Reille to carry out any imperial orders which would arrive and to transmit these orders to general d'Erlon at Jumet. As Flahaut met Reille around 10 a.m., Reille could have started his movements between 10.30 and 11 a.m.; now he did so by noon.

⁵ By 10.15 a.m. on the 16th of June, Reille reported to both Ney and Soult about his situation, while there is no proof that d'Erlon - apart from to Soult - also reported to Ney about his halt at Gosselies. It is hard to imagine that he didn't; but if this would have been the case, this would have been a serious omission.

⁶ Charras. Histoire de la campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.184-185

⁷ Grouard, A. La critique de la campagne de 1815 p.51-52, 108
Ropes, J.C. The campaign of Waterloo p.175
Houssaye, H. 1815.Waterloo p.143

⁸ In this context, it is Grouard who sees noon as the moment that Napoleon could have carried out a maximal concentration against Blücher. In: La critique de la campagne de 1815 p.109

⁹ Cf.Grouard. La critique de la campagne de 1815 p.103

¹⁰ Aerts, W. Etudes relatives etc. p.408

¹¹ Cf. Kurtz, H. Le procès du maréchal Ney p.135
Van Löben Sels, E. Bijdragen tot de krijgsgeschiedenis etc. Vol.IV p.553
Charras. Histoire de la campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.221
Even d'Erlon himself makes the mistake of interpreting the occupation of Quatre Bras as a means of preventing Wellington to aid Blücher; on the other hand he sees that Napoleon didn't intend to have two simultaneous actions, but that the 2nd corps was pulled into an

action. In: Le maréchal Drouet, comte d'Erlon p.95

Von Clausewitz does the same to defend Ney: whether Ney was at Frasnes or Quatre Bras, he would in both cases keep Wellington away from Blücher. But then the operations on the 16th are only seen from the allied side, and not as Napoleon had wished it would be: not two simultaneous actions at the same time. In: Hinterlassene Werke p.72-74

Also see: Duc d'Elchingen. In: Correspondance etc. p.121

The same does Wellington when he would have said: "that it [the victory at Ligny] would have been more complete if he [Napoleon] had brought a greater number of troops into action, and not detached so large a body against the British troops." Cited in: The Greville diary p.82

¹² Houssaye believes it was towards 6 or earlier. In: 1815.Waterloo p.137

¹³ Cf.Houssaye, H. 1815.Waterloo p.142

¹⁴ Cf. Charras. Histoire de la campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.182

Von Pflugk Harttung. In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI nr.II.12. p.34, 61,64

Logie, J. Waterloo. La campagne de 1815 p.166

¹⁵ Cf. Charras. Histoire de la campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.231 and Vol. II p.227-229

He clearly blames Napoleon, as can be expected.

Delbrück sees the delay, but isn't explicit about the ones who can be blamed for that. In: Einiges zum Feldzuge von 1815 p.652

¹⁶ Grouard, A. La critique de la campagne de 1815 p.50-53, 106-108

Grouard's conclusion for the 16th of June is that the results that day were incomplete because of the fact that Napoleon realised too late what was happening in front of him and this, in turn, had to do with his lack of activities that morning – which was, in its turn, due to state of health of Napoleon.

Thiers, in his turn, tries to explain the delay in the need for information about the whereabouts of the enemy and by the fact that there would be time enough left for a major battle, but he is a writer who believes Napoleon planned to have the battle at Ligny right from the beginning. In: Histoire du consulat etc. Vol.VI p.443

¹⁷ Ropes, J.C. The campaign of Waterloo p.132-133, 164

In this issue Ropes states: "The course adopted by Napoleon was unquestionably the one most in accordance with the principles of war. Whether a chance of success justifies a departure from the practice of those principles, or whether such a departure is warranted only in cases of emergency, is the real question."

Ropes adds that the delay in the battle of Ligny was also caused by the relatively long time Napoleon needed for observing the Prussians; as if he had never observed armies before ! Cf. p.163

¹⁸ The sole base for the alleged orders of Napoleon to Ney of the 15th of June for the occupation of Quatre Bras are the accounts of Napoleon himself and Gourgaud, plus the official French bulletin written on the evening of the 15th of June.

Cf. Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France en 1815 p.81, 88

Gourgaud, C. Campagne de dix huit cent quinze p.39-40

Napoleon Bonaparte.Correspondance. Nr.22056

The absurdity of the claim of these documents, however, is overwhelmingly demonstrated by numerous original documents written during the campaign.

First of all, the framework for the orders Ney was acting on the 15th of June is set on the one hand by the orders issued by Napoleon to the 1st and 2nd corps in the afternoon and by Ney's report of 11 p.m. of the same day. Additionally, these same orders are confirmed again by Soult's order to d'Erlon of the late evening of the 15th of June. They close the circle for the day when it comes down to orders issued to Ney.

As a matter of fact, they fully corroborate each other in the sense that Ney was supposed to move to *Gosselies*. From there, Ney sent the light cavalry of the guard towards Frasnes (cf. the report of its commander).

As secondary sources, the official French report dated 20th of June, as well as Ney's, Reille's and Soult's versions of the events support the inevitable conclusion, i.e. that Ney was *not* ordered by Napoleon on the 15th of June to occupy Quatre Bras.

Cf. Bas, F.de – La campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.454

Ney in his letter to Fouché, dated 26th of June 1815. In: LMB, nr.AS1301

Reille. In: Notice historique etc. In: Documents inédits etc. p.57

Soult's account. In: Documents inédits p.30

One of Soult's staff officers, baron colonel Petiet, says in his memoirs that Ney "recut l'ordre de marcher par Gosselies et Frasnes sur la route de Bruxelles." In: Petiet, A. Souvenirs militaires etc. p.191

While both Napoleon and Gourgaud make the orders of Napoleon to Ney very specific (Quatre Bras), Heymès - the first aide de camp of Ney – in his turn makes them open-ended by simply stating them to be as "allez et poussez l'ennemi." In: Relation etc. In: Documents inédits etc. p.4

Chuquet publishes in his work the so-called (verbal) order as given by Napoleon as well. His version is basically a contraction of the versions of Heymès and Gourgaud. Apart from the actual incorrectness of the order in question, it is unacceptable to publish these kind of orders in a work like this, in which *written* orders have been published and this for the simple reason that the substance of verbal orders cannot be fully authenticated. Other examples of such orders are those given to Grouchy on the 16th and 17th of June. In: Inédits Napoléoniens p.461, 468, 469 and 471

Ropes, in describing the argument of the bulletin, is so naive to suppose that if the French staff then believed Ney to be at Quatre Bras that he had to admit this, "unless we graciously invent an intention to deceive the public" – and this is just what the bulletin did, not only in this point but also in several others.

And in connection to the official documents Ropes makes a too simple allusion by stating that if they would make no reference to the supposed order, there "was no need to and such a mention of it would be unusual and unmilitary." In: The campaign of Waterloo p.68-69

It is in this connection necessary also to mention the alleged meeting (as claimed by Heymès) between Ney and Napoleon during the night of the 15th (between midnight and 2 a.m.). In this meeting Ney would have made his report and Napoleon would have explained him his plans for the 16th of June and would have given him some orders.

The original documents preceding and following this period of time do not provide any substance to this claim in any way whatsoever, and therefore the claim should be regarded as nonsense.

Cf. Pontécoulant, F.G. de - Souvenirs militaires p.63

For those who believe this conversation actually took place, see:

In: Relation etc. In: Documents inédits etc. p.4

Charras. Histoire de la campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.109, 138

Van Löben Sels, E. Bijdragen tot de krijgsgeschiedenis etc. Vol.IV p.539

Grouard, A. La critique de la campagne de 1815 p.48-49

Ropes, J.C. The campaign of Waterloo p.126

Sometimes Reille's account is used to prove that Ney went to Charleroi, as Reille writes: "Vers les sept heures du matin le général Reille alla voir monsieur le maréchal Ney, qui était rentré dans la nuit à Gossellies, pour lui demander des ordres." This, however, doesn't prove that Ney came from Napoleon, in fact Reille states that Ney told him at 7 a.m. that he was waiting for the emperor's orders. In: Documents inédits etc.p.57

As a last remark here: there may be a reason for the inavailability of the reports of both colonel Bussy and Ney (dated 6 and 7 a.m. of the 16th of June) and the discussion referred to here. It is very tempting to suppose that both these documents will provide even more solid proof that Ney then was waiting for Napoleon's orders for that day.

¹⁹ This presumption is expressed in for example the claim of Napoleon that Ney had to be at Quatre Bras on the 16th of June in order to await Wellington's concentration there, thereby having the chance to confront him. In: Mémoires pour servir etc. p.100

²⁰ De Pontécoulant publishes quite some documents which were produced during the campaign, but in his fanaticism to mark Ney as a scapegoat, he even suggests as if Napoleon had issued much more orders during the night of the 15th of June to Soult and his corps-commanders and which "formeraient plus d'un volume."

Above all, these orders would be "des modèles de précision et de clarté." These claims cannot be characterised in another way as just total nonsense. In: Souvenirs militaires p.68, 125

²¹ On the 15th and 16th of June, after the moment Ney received his command, the following sources of information were transmitted between the left and right wing (with estimated times of arrival between brackets):

From left to right of the left wing:

15th of June:

-11 p.m. Ney to Soult [1 a.m.]

16th of June:

-6 a.m. colonel Bussy, oral report [8 a.m.]

-7 a.m. Ney to Soult, as a reaction to his request for information dated 4.30 a.m. [9 a.m.]

-8 a.m. [?] report of an officer of lancers to Soult [10 a.m.]

-10.15 a.m. Reille to Soult (and Ney) [noon]

-11 a.m. Ney to Soult [1 p.m.]

-1 p.m. Lobau to Soult (based upon information prior to 11.30 a.m.) [3 p.m.]

-between 1 and 3 p.m: d'Erlon to Soult [between 3 and 5 p.m]

-10 p.m. Ney to Soult [midnight]

Colonel Flahaut remained at Frasnes till dawn of the 17th of June.
There is no evidence that Ney reported back to Soult after 11 a.m., even though the order of 2 p.m. requested him to do so.

From central headquarters:

15th of June:

-9.30 p.m. Soult to Ney (and d'Erlon)

16th of June:

-8.00 –9.00 a.m.: orders for Ney [10.30 – 11 a.m.]

-10 a.m.: Soult to Ney [noon]

-2 p.m. Soult's order to Ney [4 p.m.]

-3.15 p.m. idem [5.30 p.m.]