

The Prussian plan for the battle of Ligny.

The area around Sombreffe was one which Blücher was bent on using either as one for a major battle against Napoleon, or as a position from which further movements could be developed, depending on those of the French (see above).

And it was because of the fact that he saw the opportunity to fight Napoleon that he intended (and needed) to have his whole army collected in that very position before Napoleon would force him to take other steps.

All this resulted in a specific order of battle in this position on the 16th of June, but what was its deeper background, the Prussian plan for the battle ? There is no document written during the campaign in which this has been described, and so it has to be drawn from other evidence.

For the scenario of an action in the position of Sombreffe, the Prussian staff had a general plan which had been developed by count Von der Gröben more than three weeks before the battle took place.

The use of this position was based upon the fact that the Prussians would be facing Napoleon alone, without any direct support of Wellington.

Basically, the position as it was proposed was one in which the 2nd corps had a defensive position between Sombreffe and Tongrinnes, while the 3rd corps was in its rear at Point du Jour as a reserve. As the area between these villages was seen as a very strong defensive position, both these units were mostly meant to have a defensive role, as it was presumed that the enemy would advance from Fleurus towards the crossroads of Point du Jour.

At the same time, the 1st corps would have a position north of the heights of Brye, as well as in Ligny; the 4th corps would be in position further to the rear between Elvaux and Chapelle Saint Rosaire as a reserve for the 1st corps. Both these corps would be available for an offensive, starting from Brye, against the French left flank. This offensive was part of the total position.

If necessary, even the 3rd corps could be available for this offensive.

The purpose of the position was twofold: on the one hand it was a protection of the lines of retreat towards Liège and Maastricht, while on the other it would give the opportunity to throw the enemy back into the defiles of the Sambre.

Within this plan, it was seen that the French could bombard the defensive position only, while the main thrust would be directed towards the right wing, through Saint Amand or Ligny.

Yet, even though Von der Gröben saw this is a probable chain of events, there is no scenario what to do in that case.

Von der Gröben does give one in case the French would actually turn the right flank of the position and it was in this context that a retreat was considered of both the 1st and 4th corps to a position on the heights of Marbijoux, while the 2nd and the 3rd corps would then attack the enemy in its rear as it was pursuing these other corps.¹

Von der Gröben also saw that the position in itself was a strong one, as long as the enemy's numbers would not be superior the Prussian numbers. However, with numbers twice as large, the risk to be turned either to the right or to the left was there.

I have no real proof how the plan of Von der Gröben was taken up by the Prussian staff, but it seems as if it was greeted with enthusiasm.²

In determining the basic idea behind the Prussian positions in the one of Sombreffe, it is essential to take a close look at development of this idea through time.

I have sketched the original idea and plan as it was developed by Von der Gröben, but due to the absence of Von Bülow, this option as a whole fell out.

As has been shown before – in the current situation - the 1st, 2nd and 3rd corps were just about in time in the position of Sombreffe before the actual battle started, while it was on the late evening of the 15th of June that the 4th corps of Von Bülow was expected at Gembloux on the early morning the other day, and in the position of Sombreffe in the afternoon. In the very early morning hours of the 16th of June, however, it became clear that Von Bülow couldn't make this.

He was then ordered to advance towards the plateau of Ardenelle, which is at the old Roman road and about 3 kilometers north-east of the position between Elvaux and the Chapelle Saint Rosaire. It doesn't become clear from this order what the idea of the Prussian general staff was about the time Von Bülow was expected there and, with that, of his role in a possible battle on the 16th of June.

Yet, presuming Von Bülow was in and around Hannut on the early morning of the 16th of June as he had promised to be and the carrier of the order left by 5 a.m., he could have arrived by 10 a.m. at Hannut (the distance between Sombreffe and Hannut is about 50 kilometers). If Von Bülow had put his corps in motion by 11 a.m., it could not reach the plateau of Ardenelle before midnight of the 16th of June. As it happened in reality, Von Bülow's advance guard reached Baudeset (which is about 8 kilometers from Ardenelle) by 10 p.m.

This moment of certainty about Von Bülow's absence on the 16th of June was of course a most important one for the Prussian general command. Not having Von Bülow in hand, there were now three options:

- to accept a battle in the position of Sombreffe against a probable superior enemy with three army-corps only
- to fall back behind the Dyle and give up the communication lines with the Rhine and Namur
- to pull back on Namur, and give up the communication with Wellington's army.³

Somewhere early that morning the Prussian staff decided to go for the first option. The main reasons to do so must have been the intention to push back Napoleon with the available troops, or, if this would prove not to be possible, to maintain the position and fight it out the next day in conjunction with Von Bülow and Wellington after all.

The Prussian high command must have taken a possible cooperation with Wellington at a later stage into account and in the Sombreffe-position this would have a better prospect as in one further east.

That same morning the positions of the three respective army-corps were determined.

The 1st corps would get a position between Brye, Saint Amand and Ligny, while at the same time these villages were barely or not occupied.⁴

The 2nd corps was meant to be placed into its rear, while the 3rd corps was to come on the Namur road between Sombreffe and Bothey.

Though different in some details, the general disposition of the three army-corps is in its general arrangement similar to the one as developed by Von der Gröben. Now, the 1st and 2nd took the positions as originally assigned to the 1st and 4th corps, while the 3rd corps was initially supposed to take a position in the one it was supposed to have in the original design. Apart from the absence of Von Bülow, the main differences were in a more southern position of the 2nd corps, an absence of a garrison at Ligny and of a corps between the strongholds of Sombreffe and Tongrines.

It is in this context that Gneisenau describes the position as one consisting of one having its right wing on Brye, its left on Ligny, while Saint Amand was in front. The other part of the position was the one of Sombreffe, which was occupied by the 3rd corps.⁵

Having the 2nd corps as a reserve for the 1st (in stead of the 4th corps) and the 3rd corps in a defensive position at Point du Jour, it is clear that the main part of the forces was on the right, and this in turn goes back to the basic idea incorporated in the proposal as worked out by Von

der Gröben of having the possibility for an offensive strike on the right, while keeping a strong defence on the left (where now a reserve was missing).

From the way the battle was fought, conclusions have been drawn on the way Blücher wanted to fight the battle but this is not a very reliable way of approaching the subject as distortions can easily take place due to reactions of actions to each other in itself which have nothing to do with the *original* idea before the action.

Yet, what is clear in the whole battle is that Blücher gave his right wing an immense weight, which can be another indication that he clung to the original idea of attempting to emerge from the right wing so as to throw the French army back into the valley of the Sambre, while remaining on the defensive on his left wing.

Von Grolmann wrote the next day: "Das III.Armeekorps war von Sombreffe bis Balâtre in der Stellung aufgestellt; das I.und II.Korps waren aber bestimmt die Gegend und Dörfer von Ligny, Saint Amand und Wagnelée zu besetzen und sobald sich günstige Umstände ereigneten, oder das IV. Armeekorps oder Teile der englischen Armee angekommen wären, zum Angriff überzugehen." ⁶

Again, though here hindsight may have crept in, the returning element is one of an offensive action on the right wing, with Thielmann playing a stationary role on the left wing.

Finally, the attempt of the Prussian staff to draw Von Bülow to a position on the plateau of Ardenelle can on the one hand be interpreted as an intermediate position for the army to fall back on in case of reverse. In fact, the plan which was designed by Von der Gröben had, in case of a French manoeuvre on the right flank, taken into account a retreat of the 1st and 4th corps (now the 1st and 2nd corps) towards the heights of Marbijoux, which is in fact very near to the plateau of Ardenelle. This would then be a second position for part of the army, while the remainder of it could fall upon Napoleon's rear.

The position could also be an intermediate one for a possible offensive on the right wing on the 17th of June in case the army could maintain its position till then. In fact, the plateau of Ardenelle was also close to the position it would have been assigned had it arrived in time for the battle on the 16th of June.

As far as the French advance and the Prussian impression of it is concerned, the 1st corps was pulled in to its position in rear of Ligny and Saint Amand at 8.a.m., a moment that there was still plenty of time to do so.

By the time the 2nd corps reached Sombreffe (10 a.m.) French activity was still very low. It was only after 11 a.m. that French forces started to emerge in power from Fleurus, of which cavalry filed out to the right and infantry (the 3rd corps) to the left. By that time, the Prussian staff probably still didn't have a clear idea of what the French were after. It was towards 1 p.m. that another strong force was seen approaching from Baulet (the 4th infantry-corps). As the French forces moved up on both sides of the road which leads from Fleurus to Point du Jour, it seemed as if they were heading for the Prussian left wing in particular. ⁷

However, by 2 p.m. the French forces suddenly shifted their front line from the road Fleurus - Point du Jour towards Saint Amand and Ligny.

As a result, the Prussian high command reacted by making a few changes in the positions: both Ligny and Saint-Amand-la Haye were now occupied, while the 3rd corps was pulled further to the west, to the defensive position between Sombreffe and Tongrines (except for its cavalry). ⁸

At 1 p.m. the duke of Wellington arrived at Prussian headquarters. It doesn't become clear either from the eye-witness accounts of the conversation which took place what plan the Prussians actually had, but the fact that during this conversation Gneisenau wanted Wellington to move with his army over the Namur-road towards Sombreffe and place his army as a reserve

between that village and Les Trois Burettes could be another indication of how the Prussians saw the battle should develop in their idea, either with Von Bülow or Wellington, if this would prove to be possible as an alternative: by massing a huge number of troops in rear of the right wing.

However, as Wellington's assistance (in whatever strength that may be) seemed to be impossible before the battle would start (the Prussians obviously couldn't know when the battle would start), the meeting didn't result in any changes in the Prussian order of battle.

Taking all components together, my impression of the way the Prussians came to the final disposition of the army-corps in the position of Sombreffe before 2 p.m. on the 16th of June was one which was in its general outline determined by the original plan as it was developed by Von der Gröben, while at the same time it was adapted to the absence of Von Bülow and to the impression the Prussian leadership had of the French advance. In that context, also because the position was meant as either a battleground or a position from where other operations could be carried out, it was an intentional position up till the moment there was no more doubt about this advance.

Intentional, in the sense that the order of battle doesn't seem to have completely crystallized as long as the direction of the French wasn't fully clear. This non-committence may have also been the cause that in a way, in its details, the battlefield was an improvised one and that for instance Ligny and Saint Amand in particular were not well occupied and entrenched before the battle started.⁹

Yet, with all changes and uncertainties, the Prussians not merely aimed that day at maintaining the army's position until more forces (Von Bülow and / or Wellington) would become available. This hope of being able to maintain their position may have arisen *during* the battle as it developed, but it probably was no presumption before.¹⁰

The intention probably was to defeat Napoleon right away, even in this situation of the absence of the corps of Von Bülow and of forces of Wellington's army and that the position / order of battle was not fully worked out as it could have been.¹¹

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¹ For the text of this plan, see the preambles. Again, as I haven't got the original or a full copy of it, it is the extract which is used here from Von Ollech.

² Cf. Ollech, Von Geschichte etc. p.65-67

He mentions colonel Von Nostitz. He writes about the position which would have received in the staff "eine fast schwärmerische Liebhaberei". In: Das Tagebeuch etc. p.18

³ Plotho, Von Der Krieg etc. p.35

⁴ Von Reiche describes the situation as if he took the initiative to place the corps between Brye, Ligny and Saint Amand, while it probably was part of the whole plan to place it there. The element of securing the Roman road refers, again, to the fear of the Prussian staff for the right flank of the army as a precondition to accept a battle. In: Memoiren etc. p.171-174 Yet, in his report written in 1815 he is not that specific that it was him who had the idea of locating the corps between these villages. Here merely mentions it did so, without specifying who gave the order. He does mention the fact that the corps also occupied the villages as it was not known where then the other army-corps would be placed. In: KA, VI.E.7.I.7 In: GSA, VPH_HA, VI nr.VII.5.p.45

Delbrück thinks that the Prussian staff still hesitated on the 16th of June to accept the battle in the position due to its deficiencies, even though it had been studied before. In: Das Leben etc. Vol.IV p.372-373

⁵ Gneisenau in his report to general Von Knesebeck, 17th of June. In: Lettow Vorbeck, O.von Napoleons Untergang Vol. p.526-528

⁶ In:KA,VI.E.3.II.144

Lettow Vorbeck, O.von Napoleons Untergang. p.524-525

⁷ Pflugk Harttung, J.von In: GSA. VPH-HA,VI nr.III. nr.3 p.14

⁸ Cf. Delbrück, H. Das Leben etc. Vol.IV p.377

By 2.30 p.m. the full force of French army must have been present; according to the Prussian reports of the 17th of June this must have made an impression of about 120.000 men to the Prussian high command. This number, however, may have been used to enlarge the enemy's force as an excuse for the defeat of the army. Cf. Gneisenau and Blücher to their wives and Blücher to the Prussian king (cf. chapter on the Prussian headquarters on the 17th of June).

⁹ Von Reiche. He refers to the lack of reconnaissance and the almost total absence of fieldworks. In: Memoiren etc. p.175

Cf. Pflugk Harttung, J.von In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI nr.III, nr.3 p.40-41

Henckel, at Ligny, reports he had the instruction to hold the village under all circumstances; the other report of the 4th brigade confirms there was only a short time to strengthen the village by barricading the streets, cutting loopholes etc. etc. In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI nr.VII nr.5 p.106 and 89

The disposition as written out by Zieten for his corps early that morning also remarks:
“Wegen nicht zureichender Kenntnis der Ortlichkeit ist es gestattet, dass die Brigaden bei
Besetzung der Dörfer und des Terrains sich gegenseitig aushelfen.” In: Ollech, Von.
Geschichte des Feldzugs etc. p.120
Reiche, L.von Memoiren etc. p.174

¹⁰ Von Clausewitz claims the Prussian plan at Ligny was to break the power of the French advance in the villages of Ligny and Saint Amand, and then to fall upon them the moment they would emerge from them. Thielmann was supposed to hold the low ground of the Ligne with skirmishers only and in case this would not be possible, to advance with complete battalions. In: La campagne de 1815 etc. p.68, 69

¹¹ Aerts also sees a distinction between the plan as it may have before the battle or that it may have risen during the battle. He describes this as: holding out at Saint Amand, Ligny and further east so as to pin down a large part of Napoleon’s forces while at the same time, wheeling round Napoleon’s extreme left flank by Wagnelée with the reserves. Aerts sees the link between the defense on the one side and a possible offensive on the other, but he doesn’t make the link to Von der Gröben’s plan and takes it from the events during the battle. In: Etudes etc. p.377