

Introduction.

The following chapters deal with the preambles of the campaign as far as the allied armies are concerned. The approach chosen for is one of the integration of the relevant sources, in which those regarding the Anglo-German-Netherlands army and those regarding the Prussian army will be dealt with in a parallel and chronological way.

Within this chronological approach I have divided the period involved (starting in the middle of March up to the 15th of June) in weeks to make the chapters more accessible. Any other dividing lines would be too subjective.

Per chapter, the information is in most cases more or less arranged thematically (like the intelligence which came in during that particular period of time, the composition and the formation of the armies, the communication between their commanders, their ideas, the invasion into France etc.).

Each chapter is closed by a series of observations, while the full preambles will be closed by a series of more general and summarising observations on the defensive positions of the allied armies.

12th - 18th of March

The situation of the prince of Orange.

Von Kleist, the commander of the Prussian forces on the Rhine, described the prince's forces in the middle of March thus:

“Die englische Armee in Belgien ist weder stark noch in besonders guter Verfassung. 22 höchst inkomplette englische Bataillone inkl. Der deutschen Legion führen einige 20 Stück schlechtes Geschütz und betragen kaum 15000 Mann der schlechtesten englischen Truppen. Das Hannoversche Korps hat eine einzige Batterie bei sich. Von den Belgiern ist kaum zu reden. Das ist miserables, zusammengelaufenes Gesindel. Die ganze Armee kann höchstens 30000 Mann mit einigen 40 Stück schlechtem Geschütz betragen, und nach den letzten Nachrichten von dem holländischen Gesandten General Fagel [1] – vom 14.März – wonach Bonaparte in wenigen Tagen in Paris sein könnte, scheinen mir die Engländer über ihre Lage nicht ohne Besorgnis zu sein.”²

By late March this mixed force had increased to about 40.000 men.³

As has been stated before, the prince, at this time, was in command of the Anglo-Hanoverian forces in the southern part of the Netherlands, to which a few Belgian units were attached as well. The field army of the Netherlands was in formation and was led by his brother Frederik from the 26th of March onwards.⁴

After the news of Napoleon's landing on French soil had reached Paris by the 5th of March, it was from here on the 11th of March that lord FitzRoy Somerset urged the prince of Orange to “immediately adopt such measures to defend the frontier of Belgium as may appear advisable to Your Royal Highness.”⁵

While the prince was clearly aware of a possible French threat towards the Low Countries, he also had his eye fixed upon demonstrations towards the French frontier in the north and a possible military intervention in France, unless of course Napoleon would attack himself.

His idea to do so, alone or in conjunction with Von Kleist, was to prevent Napoleon from gaining power.

In this sense, he made pleas towards his father, Willem I of the Netherlands, Louis XVIII and the duke of Wellington. To Wellington, he wrote on the 13th of March:

“[...] if Napoleon continues to have any success, nothing but a combined and rapid movement of the British, Dutch, and Prussian troops disposable in this neighbourhood can stop him and save Louis XVIII.

My opinion is that we ought to support him with all we can, and move to that effect into France if Napoleon continues to gain ground; and on this head I beg to have your instructions. Sir C.Stuart might, perhaps, be directed to induce the Dutch to be prepared to move also. In the meantime I intend to put the principal places, without loss of time, in some state of defence, and beg you will send out as soon as possible the heavy artillery, which may be wanted before long. [...] I feel perfectly assured that your Lordship will agree with me in thinking that nothing ought now to be spared to put ourselves here in a state of defence. I have just sent general Lowe to Aix-la-Chapelle to learn in how far we can depend upon the assistance of the Prussian troops under general Kleist's command, and have recommended to my father to assemble a Dutch corps in the neighbourhood of Maestricht. [...] it seems to me that we may be here *à la gueule du loup* before we are aware of it.”⁶

And a few days later, on the 17th of March, the prince wrote more extensively about his actions and intentions to earl Bathurst:

“I received this morning your letter of the 14th; and it is indeed with satisfaction that I have heard that the duke of Wellington is likely to come to the Netherlands. I will be happy to deposit in his hands the command the

British government thought me worthy to be intrusted with; and I shall always be proud of this mark of confidence.

But although it would have been mortifying to me to give it up, under the present circumstances, to anybody else, yet to him I do it with pleasure; and he may be well assured that under all circumstances I will second him upon a larger scale with the same zeal I served him formerly as his aide-de-camp. I shall never forget that period of my life; I owe everything to it; and if I now may hope to be of use to my country, it is to the experience I acquired under him that I have to attribute it.

Everything in this moment depends upon collecting a large body of troops on the northern frontier of France, since Buonaparte will, I am persuaded, enter Paris very shortly. [7] He then will move without delay down upon this frontier; and I am assured that in one of his proclamations, which, however, I have not seen, he declares his intention to retake Belgium; but if he does not attack us, it becomes our game to move upon him without delay. I have taken all the steps of precaution I thought necessary under the present circumstances. I can rely upon the assistance of general Kleist. I have persuaded my father to assemble a large body of Dutch troops about Maestricht; any steps have been taken by him to that effect. [8] The disposable British troops are collecting about Ath and its vicinity, so as to occupy the country between Tournay and Mons. I had already taken it upon myself to order the works at Ostend, Nieuport, Ypres and Tournay to be carried into execution; and they are in progress. I mean likewise to secure Mons against a coup de main. What I want most is the artillery to arm these places; and I beg you will hurry it out. I heard of the guns being embarked for some time. The peace with America being ratified, it would be very desirable and most necessary to send more British troops into this country. No loss of time is everything in this moment; and I am persuaded that in three weeks, if not sooner, the French revolted army can be and most likely will be on this frontier with Buonaparte at their head. I have directed colonel Sir George Wood, commanding the Royal Artillery in this country, to write for more companies of artillery, which are absolutely necessary. I think it is in contemplation to organise a militia or something of the kind in this country; and I am sure nothing could assist the Belgian government more in this than if you would place 10.000 or 20.000 stands of arms to my disposition to arm the new levies if required.

I send tonight an officer to the duke of Wellington, giving him every information with regard to the army and to my plans of operation, in case I am called upon to act before he arrives. [9] My dear Lord, I think we ought not to give ourselves more law than a fortnight or three weeks, and everything which is to be done must be done within that period."

And in a post scriptum he wrote: "Pray send reinforcements if you can. My father has been proclaimed today King of the Netherlands." 10

The prince military secretary, colonel Colborne, shared the prince's optimism as he wrote to general Bunbury [11] on the 17th of March "we are prepared for the field." 12

Sir Hudson Lowe probably left on the 13th of March for Aachen to discuss with Von Kleist the possible Prussian assistance in the operations the prince had in mind, both defensively and offensively. He probably returned from his mission on the 15th or 16th of March. This last day he wrote to Von Kleist:

"[...] En tout cas S.A.R. a pris toutes ces mesures nécessaires, soit pour assister la cause du Roi Louis XVIII en cas que les circonstances pourroient l'exiger, soit pour se défendre en cas des malheurs entraîneront le besoin d'un tel système.

Il a déjà donné ordre pour la réunion de ses troupes à Ath et dans le voisinage, et dans très peu de jours notre armée y sera rassemblée. Il a reçu avis au même tems que S.A.R. le prince Souverain, dès le moment d'entendre les nouvelles du débarquement de Bonaparte, a donné ordre pour la Marche de l'armée Hollandoise dans la direction de Maestricht et Hasselt. Il espère qu'il se trouvera bientôt un corps d'environ 20 mille hommes.

En prenant toutes les mesures précautionnaires que dépendent de lui, il n'a pas manqué en même temps chercher tous les notions possibles sur les mouvemens [sic] de Buonaparte et les dispositions que peut prendre le Roi pour se soustraire de son attentat.

S.A.R. a envoyé un officier de confiance à Paris pour faire connoître au Ministre Anglais les mesures qu'on prend, afin que le Roi en peut être instruit, et que Sa Majesté peut faire connoître lui-même ses vœux et désirs sur tel objet, S.A.R. étant déterminé d'y accéder sans même attendre des instructions précises à cet égard. Si Buonaparte est arrivé ou arrivera dans peu de jours, son premier mouvement serait naturellement avec toutes ses forces dans cette direction. Telle ai-je entendu a déjà été sa déclaration. Dans le cas qu'il rencontre des obstacles dans la Marche à Paris, nous serons en avant, et à même de pouvoir opérer quelque chose à l'avantage du Roi s'il exige.

C'est dans le jugement de V.E. de décider sur les meilleurs mesures à prendre avec l'armée sous ses ordres dans ces cas si extraordinaires. La Marche en avant de son armée a paru à Son Altesse Royale la chose la plus favorable pour l'opinion générale, et pour accélérer toute opération ultérieure; mais ce mouvement auroit plus qu'un double effet s'il étoit appuyé par les mêmes démonstrations du côté de l'armée Prussienne, spécialement pour ce qui a rapport à l'opinion générale en France, et à vos désirs de s'opposer aux plans de Buonaparte pour la subversion du système actuel. Le Prince a été charmé d'entendre la disposition que V.E. a déjà manifesté à cette égard. Il m'a chargé de vous en donner ses remerciemens, et à dire qu'il en est sensible on ne peut plus.

Il voit toute l'avantage de la position fixée pour l'armée Prussienne; et s'il a cru suggérer quelques démonstrations plus marquées sur les frontières de la France; il ne doute pas que les raisonnemens offerts ne lui seroient pas d'excuse.

La plupart des garnisons de Lille, Valenciennes et Maubeuge sont Marchés pour Paris, mais c'est pour revenir bientôt si Buonaparte s'empare de la capitale. S'il rencontre de l'opposition, nous voici bien à même de pouvoir en profiter.”¹³

So, by mid March, the prince pulled his British forces together around Ath, in the country between Tournay and Mons. Near Mons, these troops were covered by a brigade of cavalry of major general Von Dörnberg. Posts through Hannut and Tongeren formed the communication between Namur and Maastricht and from there also through Sterkensweert to the garrison of Venlo and Aachen, where Von Kleist had his headquarters. At the same time, a large body of Dutch troops was assembled by Willem I near Maastricht and Hasselt.

Taking into account possible French operations against the Netherlands, the prince of Orange also established communication posts between Brussels and Louvain, Malines and Ghent, between Brussels and Mons (via Hal, Braine le Comte and Casteau) and between Brussels and Nivelles (via Waterloo).¹⁴

Both the Dutch and Belgian army were mobilised on the 17th and 24th of March respectively.¹⁵

Units of the Dutch army started their marches south by the 20th of March, while the Belgian units converged from all kinds of places in Belgium to the area where the mobile army of the Netherlands was to be assembled, organised and equipped, that is between Maastricht and Louvain, on the left bank of the river Meuse.¹⁶

Defence works.

As the prince wrote on the 17th of March about his mobile army and his order for “the works at Ostend, Nieuport, Ypres and Tournay to be carried into execution” and his intention “to secure Mons against a coup de main “, he referred to an equal important part of the defence position of the Netherlands: the presence of strongholds, entrenched camps, fortresses, field works and reinforced places and their garrisons.

Lieutenant colonel Carmichael Smyth, the commander of the Royal engineers, expressed the general goal of them as: “To prevent the French from penetrating into some part of a frontier of such an extent [from Namur to Nieuport], and in flat and open country, could never have entered into the imagination of any military man; but to hinder them from invading the Netherlands, without affording time to assemble the army destined to oppose them, on the line by which they might advance, was the object to be effected, and which problem appears to have been very effectually accomplished.”¹⁷

For Wellington, they would also play a vital role in the protection of Brussels in case Napoleon might make an irruption from his fortresses in the north into Belgium after an allied invasion of France. Their importance would lie in their strength, thereby preventing Napoleon from invading the country.¹⁸

However, by 1815, the numerous fortresses had been dismantled during the reign of the emperor Joseph, while in 1794 their destruction was completed by the French when they got possession of the country, with the exception of Antwerp, Ostend and Nieuport as these clearly had a maritime importance.¹⁹

After the peace of Paris of May 1814, as the Netherlands were created as a buffer against France, a proper defence system was an element of permanent concern.

The fact was that it had already been in the summer of 1814 that duke of Wellington carried out an inspection of defensive positions of the Netherlands during the summer of 1814.²⁰

Later, on the 23rd of July, lieutenant colonel Carmichael Smyth reported to the duke about the reports which were worked upon by his officers on the works present at Ghent, Bruges, Ostend, Nieuport, Ypres and Tournai. Carmichael Smyth himself also inspected frontier towns stretching from Ostend as far as Namur.²¹

Wellington's inspection led that same year to his instructions on the subject to colonel Chapman of the Royal engineers and these comprised places like Ghent, Dendermonde, Alost, Grammont, Ypres, Furnes, Nieuport, Ostend, Bruges, and sites like the line of the Dendre and the high ground between the Lys and the Scheldt, between Audenarde and Harlebeke.

Accordingly, Chapman wrote his report on the 1st of September 1814 [²²] and this must have been laying dormant until the 27th of January 1815 when Chapman wrote a memorandum “to meet the view of the duke of Wellington relative to the future defence of the Netherlands.”²³

The document came down to the establishment of a Committee of British engineers to “enter into detailed projects for the restoration of such ruined fortresses and for the construction of such new posts as his Grace has pointed out in his report.”

The report Chapman worked upon and referred to here was the one as written by the duke on the 22nd of September 1814, entitled “Memo on the defence of the frontier of the Netherlands.”²⁴

Although the committee was to take “a comprehensive view of the defence of the whole Netherlands” it was to pay particular attention to the following points:

“First, at Liège and Huy, to consider the necessity and best mode of restoring the works on the heights which command them.

Second, at Namur, the works of the citadel to be restored, and the front to be covered by a chain of strong casemated redoubts.

Third, at Charleroi, Mons and Ath to pay particular attention to the repair of such works as command the inundation of the country.

Fourth, at Tournay, to restore the works of the citadel, and to guard against the fortifications of the town favouring the attack of them, and to provide such defence for the town as shall secure the inhabitants from the depredations of marauding parties.

Fifth, at Courtray, Menin, Ypres, Nieuport and Ostend, to prepare everything which can be done to secure and improve the means of inundating the country at each place. At Ostend, to cover the great sluice of Sluyskens, and to propose the additions which are necessary to secure that place from an attack by the sand hills.

Sixth, at Grammont, to propose a work to be constructed on the high ground in rear of it at Notre Dame.

Seventh, at Dendermonde, to propose such works as its importance as a tête du pont upon the Scheldt, and its situation at the junction of the Dender with that river, would seem to require.

Eight, at Antwerp (considering it as a place of importance in a military point of view), to complete the works already commenced, and to consider the propriety (in it several bearings) of destroying the works, called the Intrenched Camp, to the southward of the citadel.

The Committee will propose a good casemated work, to be constructed on the site of an old Roman road work, near Binch, which will command the communication from Mons to Charleroi through that town.

The attention of the Committee is also directed, as a main feature of defence, to increasing the means of inundating the country, particularly those of the Dender, from Dendermonde to Grammont.”²⁵

The committee, under the direction of general Krayenhoff, was to make an estimate of the costs and time involved for repairing and restoring the old fortresses, the improvement of the defence and the protection and insurance of the means for inundating parts of the country.²⁶

After the commission had drawn up its plan by mid-March [27], the prince of Orange had taken it upon himself to order the works at Ostend, Nieuport, Ypres and Tournay to be carried into execution; what he wanted most from the British was artillery to arm these places.²⁸

Additionally, orders were given by the prince to bring Mons and the citadel of Ghent and the fortresses on the Scheldt into a state of defence. Antwerp was to be the central depot of the British forces and the city had a garrison, comprising two British brigades.

By the 20th of March, the prince of Orange was reported to by count König [?] who was responsible for Antwerp, the fortresses of Lillo and Liefkenshoek [29], Ostend, Nieuport and Ypres about the situation in these places. He pointed to the need of reinforcements and repair on their defences and also to the need for more artillery, including crew and supplies. König also advised the prince to nominate commanders at each place.³⁰

Around the same time, on the 23rd of March, sir Hudson Lowe, reported to Von Kleist:

“Mons, Tournay and Ypres may be well able to resist a coup de main, and daily labours are made to strengthen them. They want guns, however; the two first have only field artillery.”³¹

On the 27th of March, Wellington was informed in detail by lieutenant colonel J.Carmichael Smyth of the Royal Engineers in a memorandum about the progress in the field works in the Netherlands as initiated by the prince of Orange and which were carried out in Ostend, Nieuport, Ypres, Tournay, Antwerp, Mons etc.³²

By that time, nearly ten thousand men were working on the fortifications. Subsequently, sixty engineer officers, eleven companies of sappers and twenty thousand labourers were being employed. These labourers were requisitioned on the country.³³

During these efforts, Ostend and Nieuport were strengthened. Yet, by the 13th of June at least those at Ostend had not been finished the way they were designed to be as by that date Wellington was clear to earl Bathurst about the need for their completion, even though they would be much more expensive as they were calculated to be.³⁴

Some weeks before, on the 28th of April, Wellington had also recommended earl Bathurst “that a permanent work, which was commenced by the French at Ostend, in the sand hills to the south west of the town, similar to that in the sand hills to the north west of the town, should be completed in the course of the summer.”³⁵

The town of Ypres was repaired, armed and placed in a state of defence, while Tournai “was rendered tenable, and the walls of the old citadel formed into a defensible post, mounted with ordnance and provided with splinter-proof barracks.”³⁶

At Mons works were also carried out and inundations present, but according to a report dated 4th of June, the walls would be insufficient to make an efficient defence possible; other than that, the city would be vulnerable for a bombardment and the inundations would be insufficiently connected.³⁷

In general, all works erected were on the site of ancient works, by which towns were defended.³⁸ For this reason, nothing was done upon the Lyse at Menin or Courtray; consequently, everything would have been constructed new, for which there was no time.³⁹

As it was considered “not improbable that the French might push a corps towards Ghent, between the Lys and the Scheldt, whilst they made their principal attack from Mons or Charleroi, some very strong field-works, well palisaded and fraised, were constructed in front of Ghent, with their right upon the Lys and their left upon the Scheldt, communicating with and supported by the old rampart of Ghent, which was repaired, and Ghent itself rendered tenable.”⁴⁰ The strong field-works were constructed in April and May there where the country could not be inundated and near the chief point of defence which was in front of the Courtrai gate.⁴¹

Audenarde, with a view to facilitate the movements of the army on either side of the Scheldt, was fortified and armed and the possession of the bridge secured. A redoubt was constructed as well to protect the sluice-gates, which afforded the means of inundating that part of the country.

While the pontoon-bridge at Avelghem was covered by field-works, at Ath the old fortifications were repaired and placed in such a state of defence as to make it necessary to break ground against them.⁴² As for Wellington, Ath, however, could towards the middle of June not be regarded as a “place forte régulière.”⁴³

Additionally, the city of Antwerp must also have been considerably strengthened to be capable to hold out a siege. Its citadel had a particular strength, but it was by the middle of May that king Willem and Wellington, on the advice of its governor, general Van der Plaat, consented in the destruction of the entrenched camp here.⁴⁴ At several places defence was aided by ancient ditches and means of inundation. The ones at Audenarde have been mentioned, but there were also means at Tournay, Mons, Ghent, Ypres, Nieuport and Ostend.⁴⁵

The situation of general Von Kleist.⁴⁶

While the forces of the prince of Orange in the early days of March 1815 were scattered over Belgium [⁴⁷], those of general Von Kleist were between the rivers of the Moselle (in the south), the Meuse (in the west) and the Rhine (to the east). Basically, his army – that of the Lower Rhine – covered this part of the Rhine and consisted of three corps:

-the 1st Prussian corps, led by general Pirch II. This corps consisted of one brigade and stood in and around Koblenz. Also here was a regiment of Brandenburg hussars. Count Henckel was detached with a brigade of cavalry and a battery of horse artillery to Luxemburg. Here, major general Von Borcke led the 11th regiment of reserve-infantry.

-the 2nd Prussian corps, led by general Von Zieten. This corps consisted of two infantry brigades (the 9th and 10th, totaling 13 battalions), 3 regiments of cavalry and a reserve-artillery. It stood in and around Aachen and Verviers.

-the 3rd Prussian corps, led by general Von Borstell. [⁴⁸] This corps consisted of two brigades (the 5th and the 6th), the cavalry brigade of Von Hobe, some reserve-cavalry and reserve-artillery). It stood in the area between Krefeld, Kleef and Wesel

By the beginning of March, Von Kleist had about 30.000 men to his disposal (15 regiments of infantry and 13 regiments of cavalry).⁴⁹

In and around Köln stood a contingent of 14.000 Saxons (the 3rd German corps), led by general Von Thielmann.⁵⁰

Von Kleist had his headquarters in Aachen; his chief of staff was general Von Müffling.⁵¹

On the 13th of March, Von Kleist was advised by the minister of war, general Von Boyen [⁵²], to supply the fortresses of Wesel, Luxembourg and Jülich.⁵³ Not long after, Von Kleist started doing so.⁵⁴

After his stay at Von Kleist’s headquarters, Lowe reported to sir Charles Stuart on the 16th of March about an interview he had had with Von Kleist and of which the particulars read:

“There being strong grounded reasons to suppose that a part of the French army has already taken side with Bonaparte and that the spirit may spread through a much larger proportion of it, so as speedily to place at his disposal a force with which he might either act against the allies or endeavour to subvert the present established government and follow his views against the allies afterwards, it becomes necessary to consider of the precautions to be taken against such events in other way, particularly with reference to the position of the Prussian army stationed between the Meuse and Moselle, and the British and allied troops covering Belgium. The following queries are therefore proposed.

Query.

Suppose Buonaparte to be at present at Lyons, joined by the French army, and to entertain either of the following projects, viz. to endeavour to subvert the government by Marching direct to Paris, or to attempt to create a spirit in his favour among the French nation at large by Marching against the allies stationed on this side of the Rhine, and endeavour to force them across the river, preparatory to any changes in the government, what are the means of the allies, and what would be the best disposition, to resist him in either project, or to disconcert his measures by anticipated arrangements ?

Réponse.

Si les Souverains Alliés ont résolu de prêter leur assistance au Roi de France, il paraît qu'il faudrait avant tout s'assurer des deux points de Paris et Nancy: Paris comme le centre de l'opinion publique, qui paralyse en même temps les forteresses du Nord; et Nancy, qui, comme la capitale de la Lorraine, offre non seulement des ressources immenses pour la guerre, mais paralyse en même temps les forteresses de Metz, Thionville, Verdun, Longwy et Sautoy. Pour assurer la sûreté des ces deux corps et ses lignes de communication, la politique dictera si on peut demander du Roi de France les places de Maubeuge, Avesnes et Soissons etc. ou d'y placer des garnisons mêlées avec les Français du parti du Roi.

Aussi longtemps que l'armée Prussienne du Bas-Rhin reste dans la défensive, elle sera rassemblée en deux corps:

1er corps à Juliers, 42 mille hommes [⁵⁵]

2^e corps à Coblenz, 9 mille infanterie, 1500 cavalerie

Dans cette position elle devrait attendre les trois cas suivants:

L'ennemi se dirige sur Mayence. 2. Il se dirige sur Luxembourg. 3. Il se dirige sur Bruxelles.

Dans ces différents cas l'armée pourroit se diriger avec la plus grande facilité ou sur Mayence, sur Trèves et Luxembourg, ou sur Bruxelles. Il semble que la meilleure position de l'armée de la Belgique (le rassemblement) seroit à Ath; et si l'ennemi dirige ses forces contre l'Allemagne, entre Bruxelles et Louvain.

Query.

Suppose a part of the French army not in immediate contact with Buonaparte to declare itself for him, and to hoist the tricolor cockade, what measures to be taken by the Prussian and Allied forces opposite to them, no violation of the frontier, however, being attempted by it ?

Réponse.

Le général comte Kleist donne l'ordre qu'au moment où les troupes Françaises arboreroient la cocarde tricolore, toute communication avec la France cesseroit, et les troupes placeroient des avant-postes sur les frontières comme en guerre.

Query.

Suppose the frontier to be violated, what steps of retaliation to be used ?

Réponse.

Alors les avant-postes se repleroient sur les corps de rassemblement.”⁵⁶

It was before the 18th of March that the prince of Orange sent captain Von Scharnhorst to general Von Kleist to persuade him to assemble his army without delay on the Meuse (see below).⁵⁷

The following letter, dated 18th of March, of Von Kleist to prince of Orange may have been a reaction to this request:

“Son Altesse royale, le prince héréditaire d'Orange a envoyé un officier à Paris pour avertir l'ambassadeur anglais des rassemblement à Ath. Ainsi le roi de France sera averti de ces mouvements avant qu'ils seront exécutées, et les commandants français de Lille, Valenciennes xx auront des instructions de leur gouvernement à cet égard ce qui les rassurera et évitera des soupçons.

Il est probable que le roi de France donnera connoissance à ses Chambres de nouvelles, qu'il a reçu sur le mouvement de l'armée sous les ordres de son Altesse Royale.

Si l'armée prussienne se rassembloit sur les frontières de la France, les soupçons seraient inévitable si de la part du général en chef on n'en donnoit connoissance à Paris, ce qui auroit la suite que le roi de France donnerait de [...] la nouvelle à ses Chambres.

Le général en chef de l'armée prussienne, après avoir fait son rapport à son souverain, surpasserait ses pleins pouvoirs s'il faisait des mouvements offensifs vers les frontières de la France, ainsi il doit se borner à resserrer l'armée du Bas Rhin près de Jailliers [=Jülich], placant en même temps un corps d'armée à Liège sur la Meuse, pour bien assurer ses communications avec l'armée de la Belgique.”⁵⁸

And it was Von Müffling who wrote the same day to sir Hudson Lowe, probably as a reaction of his letter of the 16th to Von Kleist:

“Je suis parfaitement de Votre avis sur le rassemblement de l'armée de la Belgique, mais il faut bien prendre garde de ne donner des soupçons aux Français, et il faut éviter de répéter les scènes de 1792. Les gens sont d'une vanité si ridicule que Bonaparte auroit le titre de désiré s'ils vous soupçonnoient avoir [...] d'occuper Lille et Valenciennes.

Scharnhorst s'est donné toutes les peines possibles pour nous engager de rassembler tout de suite l'armée sur la Meuse. C'est à dire vers Liège et Namur pour être plus proche de l'armée des Pays Bas et de coopérer avec elle et pas vers la Moselle et Metz pour protéger le Rhin moyenne vers lequel Bonaparte probablement ne se dirigerait pas. Ce serait une faute très grave et pourroit avoir des suites funestes. D'abord il ne faut jamais s'exposer à faire des mouvements auxquels ou ne pourroit donner de suite et qui pourroient porter le caractère d'incertitude.

Il est très possible que Napoleon (s'il réussit de se mettre sur la throne) donne ses premiers coups du côté de la Suisse et de Mayence car

1. ses forteresses assurent bien le nord de son royaume (empire)
2. le rapprochement de l'Italie favoriseroit la r;evolte dans ces pays, et en Allemagne.
3. Il s'assuserait de la Suisse
4. les premiers mouvements lui donneroient des succès qui augmenteroient l'enthousiasme pour lui.

S'il dirigeoit ses forces vers la Belgique

- a. il devroit donner une bataille dont l'issue seroit toujours incertaine
- b. il s'éloigneroit de l'Italie
- c. il ouvreroit la partie de la France que n'est pas garnie par des forteresses aux invasions Allemandes et Autrchiennes
- d. il perdrait la Suisse

Ces raisons sont assez fortes pour garder une position qui met le général comte Kleist [...] de se diriger aussi bien sur Mayence que sur Bruxelles d'autant plus que malheureusement Mayence n'est pas encore en état de défense et a ni garnison suffisante ni ravitaillement.

Comme le courier parti le 11 Mars de Paris a porté la nouvelle à Vienne que la chose est très sérieuse nous devons attendre d'un moment à l'autre le nouvelles dispositions.”⁵⁹ And in another note of the same date Von Müffling wrote to Lowe about a possible French threat and after that: “[...] Nos mesures sont bonnes, nos forces considérables et il peut espérer que nous réunirons.”⁶⁰

The same day, the 18th of March, Von Kleist also wrote to Lowe in the same sense of not being willing to “jouer le rôle d'agresseur sans des motifs pressants” but at the same time Von Kleist felt that the prince could “se reposer sur notre [Prussian] coopération en cas d'urgence” and that he himself was in a “position critique, et je suis d'avis qu'il ne faut au nom de Dieu pas jouer le rôle d'agresseur sans des motifs puissantes; on pourroit tout gater. [...] Soyez convaincu, mon chère général, que je suis dans les meilleurs dispositions, et qu j'attache un grand prix de vous convaincre par mes actions de la haute estime que je vous porte etc.”⁶¹

Observations.

After the news of the return of Napoleon in France, the prince of Orange decided to have the major part of his forces around Ath, while having the strongholds of Mons and Tournai in front.

It is Von Müffling who explains in his memorandum for the king of the 30th of March, as being the position in which the prince believed he could cover Brussels from the French, as coming from Valenciennes. Von Müffling writes:

“Die neuesten Nachrichten deuteten darauf, dass Napoleon nicht so schnell handeln könne, als man anfangs vermutet habe. Die niederländischen und englischen Streitkräfte kämen an und erweckten den Wunsch, sich Napoleon zwischen Brüssel und Valenciennes entgegenzustellen, um die Hauptstadt zu sichern und sie nicht zu einem Revolutionsherde zu machen. *Unfraglich* [my italics] sei Brüssel wichtig; man dürfe nichts zur Erhaltung seiner Hilfsmittel unterlassen, die Befestigungen von Mons und Tournai dienten dazu und befänden sich in Verbindung mit der Stellung von Ath. Es scheine, dass die Verteidigung Brüssels von der Stärke dieser beiden Plätze und der der Armee abhängen, die man bei Ath dem Feinde entgegenzuwerfen vermöge.”

For the British, the position chosen by the prince around Ath and towards Tournai and Mons was one “[...] so near the frontier as to cover the country, and to afford protection against any movement which Buonaparte may venture to make until the arrival of succours from England shall permit measures of farther precaution.”⁶²

Apparently, both the British and the prince felt, if an offensive would take place, that the main threat would then come from the area around Valenciennes towards Brussels. Yet, the full background of the strategic positioning of the forces was not made fully clear to the Prussians.

As Napoleon has entered Paris the prince of Orange wanted to collect a large body of troops on the northern frontier of France as he thought Napoleon would move upon his northern frontier to invade Belgium within two to three weeks.

It was the reason for the prince to occupy the area between Mons and Tournay, to ask Von Kleist for support, to bring some towns (Ostend, Nieuport, Ypres and Tournay) into a state of defence and to ask his father Willem I to assemble a large Dutch force around Maastricht.

In case Napoleon would not attack, the prince wanted to invade France himself, so as to support Louis in case the king asked for his assistance. For that reason he was in contact with Louis XVIII to coordinate this support. The optimistic idea of the prince of Orange to intervene in France must have been based upon his belief that in this stage of the situation, a military support for Louis XVIII and his royalist units might be decisive in halting Napoleon's surge for power. It soon turned out however that this bold proposal of the prince could not meet the approbation of the British, nor from Louis XVIII himself (see below).

Lowe was sent out on the 13th of March to Von Kleist to ascertain whether the prince could count upon him in both his defensive and offensive operations.

Yet, Von Kleist's reply must have been very general, probably in the sense of his willingness to cooperate on the overthrow of Napoleon without entering into concrete details as it was again Lowe who wrote back on the 16th of March, asking Von Kleist to advance and to demonstrate against the French frontier.

It is not clear what Lowe refers to: to a March towards the Meuse or even further south-west, but in the context of the situation it was probably the Meuse.

The prince saw his own and the Prussian demonstrations as most favourable for the situation i.e. to deter Napoleon and to have a sound base for further operations. He didn't, however, clearly specify where he wanted the Prussians to be in relation to his own forces.

The prince wrote on the 17th of March to the British that "he could rely upon the assistance of general Kleist." Strictly speaking he was right, but materially it did not mean anything as Von Kleist's promise was most general and political, let alone the actual physical distance between both armies.

In general, it is unclear which were the prince's precise instructions and full-powers (as were those of Von Kleist), but taking into account his request towards Von Kleist, it must have been in his full-powers to do so.

In this context, there is no direct information on the mission of the officer as sent out by the prince to the duke of Wellington on the 17th of March, but what he told the duke essentially must have been the same as what the prince wrote to Bathurst the same day.

Wellington may have received this officer on the 24th or 25th of March, just a few days before he left Vienna.

Since the 17th of March, the prince of Orange also knew that he probably had to transfer his command to the duke of Wellington, as soon as he would arrive.

Yet, the formal role of Wellington at this period of time remains unclear as the prince asked him on the 13th of March for instructions what to do, particularly in relation to a possible invasion of France, while on the other hand it was lord FitzRoy Somerset who seems to have given him a free hand what to do as far as the defence of the Netherlands was concerned.

Von Kleist, apart from his contempt of the quality of the forces of the prince, and at the same time having received his request for support, was careful and chose for a political approach, binding himself to the instructions and full-powers he had. One of them was not to pass beyond the limits of the government of the Lower Rhine, thereby risking a lack of guarantees when it came down to subsistence of his forces. The other one was a lack of money for this same subsistence.⁶³

Additionally, by advancing his forces towards the frontier of France he didn't want to provoke the French and also he feared that his advance could not be followed up by further operations.

Strategically, both Von Kleist and Von Müffling took into account that Napoleon – in case he would start offensive operations – would do so towards Brussels on the one hand or Mainz and Switzerland on the other. Though for Von Kleist the second option would be the most probable one, what counted most for Von Kleist was to have the flexibility to move with his forces in one of these two directions, while having another corps at Coblenz.

In these cases of a French attack, he saw Ath as the best position for the prince to collect his forces - except for the case in which Napoleon would move towards Germany; then he saw this position between Brussels and Louvain.

Having not obtained the result he wanted through Lowe, the prince sent Von Scharnhorst to Von Kleist to request him to move his army upon the Meuse.

It was the result of this mission that, on the 18th of March, Von Kleist decided to concentrate his forces around Jülich (on the left bank of the Rhine), while placing one corps towards Liège on the right bank of the Meuse.

This change of positions still gave Von Kleist the possibility to move either to his right (Brussels) or to his left (Mainz, Luxemburg). It was also in this sense that Von Kleist wrote to the Prussian king on the 19th of March: "Ausser diesem offiziellen Schreiben habe ich durch ein Privat-Schreibem gezeigt, wie ich in keinem Falle ohne Übereilung den Versammlungspunkt Jülich aufgeben könnte, solange es nicht entschieden ist, ob Napoleon uns

in der Gegend von Mainz angreift und dadurch die Schweiz, Italien und Deutschland in Spannung erhält, oder gleich zur Eroberung von Belgien marschiert..”⁶⁴

This strategic concept was the one upon which the Prussians based their decisions.

What the prince of Orange accomplished in this period in the cooperation with Von Kleist was the further concentration of the Prussian army on Jülich and the Meuse. The new Prussian position was merely a concentration on the central point of its positions, thereby maintaining their strategical concept of flexibility. In this concept, Jülich was the pivot of the Prussian movements. The corps at Liège was a step towards the prince – in communication it may have been a major one, but strategically there was none with the prince’s British / Hanoverian forces, of which the majority were (to be) collected near Ath, thereby maintaining an enormous gap between Liège and Charleroi, and one which was also virtually uncovered. The only link it gave was the one towards the army of the Netherlands, in formation near Maastricht and Hasselt.

Revised: 11th June 2008

Copyright © Pierre de Wit

¹ General Fagel was the Dutch representative at the French court in exile at Ghent.

² Cf. his report of the 19th of March to the Prussian king. In: Pflugk Harttung, J. von Das Preussische Heer und die Norddeutschen Bundeinheiten unter General Von Kleist p.4
From here on, this title will be referred to as “Bundeinheiten”

³ Cf. State given by the duke of York to Wellington, 28th of March 1815 and the memorandum produced by sir Henry Torrens on the 4th of April 1815. In: WSD, Vol.X p.1-2, 20

In a general way they both agree upon about 18.000 British / KGL. Additionally there were about 14.000 Hanoverians

These figures, in turn, match those as given by a state, dated Brussels 17th March 1815. It specifies:
British: 10.591 KGL: 9267 Hanoverians: 14.908 Dutch: 2926 Belgians: 7615. In: Bas, F.de Prins Frederik etc. p.1312

Another state, dated 23rd of March gives as British, Hanoverian, Belgian and Dutch troops a total of 33.892 men (artillery excluded). In: HL, WP 1.492

⁴ Cf. Journal of Constant Rebecque. In: NA, 2.21.008.01 nr.25

⁵ KHA.A.40.VI.C.519

⁶ WSD, Vol.IX p.593-594

⁷ He did so on the 20th of March.

⁸ On the 20th of March 30 battalions of infantry, 10 squadrons of cavalry and 2 regiments of artillery of this army had set off from the Netherlands towards encampments near Mons and Tournai. Cf. Staatscourant, newspaper, dated 24th March 1815.

For more information on this particular subject, cf. the study of Erwin Muilwijk “Waterloo campaign.1815. The contribution of the Netherlands mobile army” at <http://home.tiscali.nl/erwinmuilwijk/index.htm>

⁹ There is no further information about this mission.

¹⁰ WSD, Vol.IX p.600

In a similar sense the prince wrote to sir Ch.Stuart the same day, i.e on the concentration of his disposable force near Ath within a few days, the construction work carried out at Tournay, Ypres and Nieuport, the presence of British / Hanoverian troops at Antwerp and Ostend and his contact with Von Kleist. In: NAK, FO 37/77

¹¹ Sir Henry Edward Bunbury, 7th Baronet (1778-1860).

¹² BL, Add.ms.37.052 f.54

¹³ BL, Add.ms.35.072 f.59-61

WSD, Vol.IX p.599

The letter was carried by captain Von Scharnhorst. Cf. Lowe to Von Kleist, dated 17th of March. In: BL, Add.ms.20.197

In this letter, Lowe refers again to the prince’s view - as expressed before - as: “Le prince espère que vous prendrez en bonne part les vues proposées la dedans pour les démonstrations à faire. Votre appui est tout ce qui lui faut.”

¹⁴ Bas, F.de – La campagne de 1815 etc. Vol.I p.168

¹⁵ Bas, F.de – La campagne de 1815 etc. Vol.I p.169, 190

¹⁶ Staatscourant, newspaper dated 24th of March 1815.

For more information on this particular subject, cf. the study of Erwin Muilwijk “Waterloo campaign.1815. The contribution of the Netherlands mobile army” at <http://home.tiscali.nl/erwinmuilwijk/index.htm>

¹⁷ Smyth, sir J.C. Carmichael – Chronological epitome of the wars in the Low Countries from the peace of the Pyrenees in 1659 to that of Paris in 1815 etc. p.369

¹⁸ In: WD, Vol.XII p.312-313

¹⁹ Captain J.W.Pringle, Royal engineers. In: Remarks on the campaign of 1815. In: Scott, W. The life of Napoleon etc. p.355

²⁰ Cf. his memo on the defence of the frontier of the Netherlands. In: NA, 2.02.01 nr.6592

²¹ NAK, WO 30/35 nr.6

²² WSD, Vol.IX p.196-210

²³ WD, Vol.IX p.548-549

On the 31st of January sir Charles Stuart sent it to lord Bathurst in London. In: NAK, FO 37/76

²⁴ In: NA, nr.2.02.01 nr.6592

I will get back to this report more extensively in the last chapter of these preambles.

The document itself is not dated but the fact that it was dated 22nd of September 1814 can be taken from two letters from Wellington to king Willem, dated 13th of October 1815 and 10th March 1816. In: Colenbrander, H.T. - Gedenkstukken etc. Vol.VIII op.285 and WD, Vol.XII p.125

²⁵ WD, Vol.IX p.548-549

²⁶ C.R.T. Krayenhoff (1758-1840) was inspector-general of the fortifications in the years 1814-1815.

²⁷ Lord Stuart to lord Castlereagh, 17th March 1815. In: Gedenkstukken etc. Vol.VII p.230

Cf. Report of [...] Gothermann, lieutenant general and inspector general of fortifications, to [...] general Douce, colonel of Royal engineers. In: KHA.A.40.XIII.10

Some time later, but still before the arrival of the duke of Wellington, captain Sperling of the British engineers was sent to Ghent to guide the works on the bridges over the Scheldt-river and the works of the city itself. In: Porter, W. and Watson, Ch.M. , History of the corps of royal engineers p.377

Further, in the middle of March arrangements were made in England for provisions for Antwerp and Ostend. Cf. reports in: KHA, A.40 XIII.10

²⁸ WSD, Vol.IX p.600

²⁹ Lillo is a fortress on the right bank and Liefkenshoek on the left bank of the Scheldt, both immediately north of Antwerp.

³⁰ KHA, A.40.XIII.10

³¹ Holland Rose, J. Sir H. Lowe etc. p.520-521

³² NAK, WO 30/35 nr.7

WSD, Vol.X p.721-724

³³ Smyth, sir J.C. Carmichael – Chronological epitome of the wars in the Low Countries from the peace of the Pyrenees in 1659 to that of Paris in 1815 etc. p.367

Captain J.W.Pringle, Royal engineers. In: Remarks on the campaign of 1815. In: Scott, W. The life of Napoleon etc. p.356

Siborne, W. History of the war etc. Vol.I p.33

At Ghent alone, by the end of April, about 4000 peasants were employed at the works. Cf. Sabine, E. (ed) , Letters of colonel Sir Augustus Frazer etc. p.500

³⁴ Wellington to earl Bathurst, 13th of June 1815. In: WD, Vol.XII p.462-463

By mid April, Nieupoort was expected to be in a good state of defence within a short time; the place then contained a couple of hundred mounted pieces. By the 23rd of that month, the works were in a respectable state of defence. Cf. Sabine, E. (ed) , Letters of colonel Sir Augustus Frazer etc. p.486, 491

³⁵ In: WD, Vol.XII p.336

³⁶ Smyth, sir J.C. Carmichael – Chronological epitome of the wars in the Low Countries from the peace of the Pyrenees in 1659 to that of Paris in 1815 etc. p.367

According to lieutenant Sperling of the Royal Engineers, Tournai was protected with earth walls. In: Letters of an officer of the corps of Royal Engineers p.120

³⁷ Report of general Van der Wijck to Constant Rebecque. In: NA, 2.13.14.01 nr.7-8

By 1815, Mons still had its medieval walls, but they were in ruins. Cf. Pierard, Chr. Les premières etc.

³⁸ Cf. Wellington's memorandum on the battle of Waterloo. In: WSD, Vol.X p.522

Captain J.W.Pringle, Royal engineers. In: Remarks on the campaign of 1815. In: Scott, W. The life of Napoleon etc. p.356

³⁹ Smyth, sir J.C. Carmichael – Chronological epitome of the wars in the Low Countries from the peace of the Pyrenees in 1659 to that of Paris in 1815 etc. p.368

⁴⁰ Smyth, sir J.C. Carmichael – Chronological epitome of the wars in the Low Countries from the peace of the Pyrenees in 1659 to that of Paris in 1815 etc. p.368

⁴¹ Sabine, E. (ed) , Letters of colonel Sir Augustus Frazer etc. p.489, 500

Wellington's instructions for the prince of Orange, 7th of June 1815. In: WD, Vol.XII p.450-452

⁴² Smyth, sir J.C. Carmichael – Chronological epitome of the wars in the Low Countries from the peace of the Pyrenees in 1659 to that of Paris in 1815 etc. p.369

⁴³ WD, Vol.XII p.465

⁴⁴ Smyth, sir J.C. Carmichael – Chronological epitome of the wars in the Low Countries from the peace of the Pyrenees in 1659 to that of Paris in 1815 etc. p.370

Sabine, E. (ed) , Letters of colonel Sir Augustus Frazer etc. p.510

Siborne, W. History of the war etc. Vol.I p.32

For the destruction of the entrenched camp, cf. Wellington to the king of the Netherlands, dated 10th May 1815. In: WD, Vol.XII p.371 and king Willem to Wellington, 12th of May 1815. In: WSD, Vol.X p.282

By the 8th of June, both generals Alava and Vincent expressed their concern to major general Van Reede about the insufficient state of defence of Antwerp. Cf. letter of major Van Reede to baron Van der Capellen, 8th of June 1815. In: NA, 2.02.01 nr.6210

G.A.G.Ph.baron Van der Capellen (1778-1848) was secretary of state for the Belgian provinces at Brussels from October 1814 to September 1815. In: <http://www.parlement.com/9291000/biof/04306>

⁴⁵ Cf. Secret memorandum, issued 30th April 1815. In: KHA, A40 VI CW10, WD, Vol.XII p.337-338, HL, WP nr. 6.1.19

Wellington's instructions for the prince of Orange, 7th of June 1815. In: WD, Vol.XII p.450-452

Lord Hill to general Colville, 1st of May. In: SRO, TD 97/1

Smyth, sir J.C. Carmichael – Chronological epitome of the wars in the Low Countries from the peace of the Pyrenees in 1659 to that of Paris in 1815 etc. p.367-369

Sperling, J. Letters of an officer of the corps of Royal Engineers p.120

It may have been in March or at least in April 1815 that Jean de Brock, inspector of bridges and roads in the department of the Lyse (nowadays the province of West-Flanders) had been assigned the task of reporting on the possibilities for inundations there. He made his report in April 1815. In: WSD, Vol.X, p.194-196
In general, it becomes clear that in this department all rivers had been canalised in 1815, except the Lys and the Scheldt.

The inundations of Ostend and Nieuport could be connected. Cf. Wellington in a memorandum dated 23rd of April, for the king of the Netherlands. In: In: WD, Vol.XII p.324-326

⁴⁶ Friedrich Emil Ferdinand Heinrich count Kleist von Nollendorf (1762-1823),

⁴⁷ On the 8th of March there were British-Hanoverian forces amongst others at Brussels, Antwerp, Menin, Ypres, Courtray, Ostend, Dixmuid, Nieuport, Mons, Tournay, Charleroi, Ath, Brughes, Grammont, Audenarde, Alost, Merxem and Ghent. Dutch troops were in Namur. Cf. state dated 8th of March. In: WSD, Vol.X p.704-711

⁴⁸ Karl Leopold Heinrich Ludwig von Borstell (1773-1844).

⁴⁹ Plotho, Von Der Krieg etc. p.12
Ollech, Von Geschichte etc. p.3
CvW Geschichte etc. p.1

⁵⁰ Das Preussische Heer in den Jahren 1814 und 1815 p.139
Johann Adolf Freiherr von Thielmann (1765-1824).

⁵¹ Friedrich Carl Ferdinand Freiherr von Müffling, called Weiß (1775-1851).

⁵² Leopold Hermann Ludwig von Boyen (1771-1848).

⁵³ Ollech, Von Geschichte etc. p.3

⁵⁴ CvW - Geschichte etc. p.1

⁵⁵ This figure is probably incorrect as by the end of March, the Prussian field army counted about 30.000 men in all.

⁵⁶ BL, Add.ms.37.052 f. 69-72 and 20.114
KHA, A40 XIII 28
NAK, FO 37/77 (sir Charles Stuart to Castlereagh)
WSD, Vol.IX p.617-618

On the 21st of March, sir Charles Stuart wrote to Lowe: "I have been favored with your letter of the 16th stating the particulars of your interview with the commander in chief of the Prussian corps in the country between the Rhine and the Meuse, and the circumstances which might induce that officer to take upon himself to concert [?] operations against the French forces in the event of Bonaparte moving with the commander in chief of the King's army in the Netherlands." In: BL, Add.ms.20.114 f.30-31

⁵⁷ Von Kleist to the Prussian king. In: Pflugk Harttung, J. von - Bundestruppen p.4
Lettow Vorbeck, O.von Napoleon's Untergang p.134-135

⁵⁸ KHA. A.40.VI.C.k9

⁵⁹ BL, Add.ms.37.052 f. 75-76 and 20.114 f.24
English translation in: Holland Rose, J. Sir H.Lowe etc. p.519-520

⁶⁰ BL, Add.ms.20.114 f.25

⁶¹ BL, Add.ms.37.052 f.73 and 20.114

⁶² Sir Charles Stuart to viscount Castlereagh, 28th of March. In: WSD, Vol.IX p.630

⁶³ Cf. Von Müffling. Memoirs etc. p.219

⁶⁴ Lettow Vorbeck, O. von Napoleon's Untergang p.134-135
Pflugk Hartung, J.von - Bundestruppen p.4