

A fundamental choice: a defensive or offensive war.

One could wonder about the real pacific intentions of Napoleon as he expressed them early April towards the allies, but reality was that they did not take this assistance. In fact they were bent upon an invasion of France to finish with Napoleon's throne once and for all. It was not a matter *whether* this invasion would take place, but *when*. Key to the invasion would be the parallel advance of the different allied armies from the north and east, but its precise date was to be determined.

As war was inevitable, it led Napoleon to think about a fundamental choice, either to fight a defensive or an offensive war. As the allies were slowly building up their numbers and drawing in upon the frontiers of France, a defensive war - as fought in 1814 - seemed to be a serious option.

A defensive war meant that Napoleon would slow down the allied advance through several defence lines and that he eventually would take up positions around Paris and Lyon to await the invasion there. ¹ This invasion would consist of several armies converging upon Paris, as the main thrust would take place there, while other forces would move against Lyon. Napoleon would operate from his central position, thereby hoping to crush the enemy armies one by one.

What of course counted was the time-frame in which an invasion could be expected.

Napoleon was well aware that the advance of the Austrian and particularly of the Russian army towards the frontiers of France would take time to be completed. Was it still towards the end of April that he held an invasion probable from the north, it was just around that time that he learned about the postponement of a general invasion until the 1st of June. ²

This decision gave Napoleon what he needed most: time. Time, to increase his forces and their equipment.

Taking into account the experience of the war of 1814, it was realistic to suppose that the allies would in this case not be able to reach Paris before the 1st of July, so another two months would in this scenario be gained.

Napoleon's supposition about a general allied invasion set for the 1st of June continued till the second week of May, when he must have learned about its postponement towards the 16th of June. ³ In this scenario, this would mean that the allied armies could reach Paris by the middle of July. ⁴

A defensive war would not only allow Napoleon to increase his forces, it would also force the enemy to leave large numbers of forces in his rear to besiege the *places fortes* and to protect his communications. Taking the 1st of July as the start date of the allied invasion, Napoleon calculated a figure of 150.000 men of the coalition as needed for these purposes - of a total of about 650.000 men. In this way, about 500.000 men would be left to fight the armies around Paris and Lyon. ⁵

The time bought by fighting a defensive war could also be used to complete the fortifications of Paris and Lyon and to increase the equipment of the forces in general.

Politically, a defensive war had both its pros and cons. An invasion into France would attach to the allies the odium of initiating war, and in this way they would strengthen Napoleon's position in France. ⁶

A defensive war also would allow Napoleon more time to complete his control over the royalists. Though he had crushed the open royalist rebellion in the south-west and south, in the north anti-Bonapartist feelings were strong. And it was just there, in the event of a defensive war, that territory had to be given up to the allies, thereby creating for the royalists the opportunity to join the allies, and this in its turn would destabilize Napoleon's position. In general, a defensive war would bring war into the country itself.

This would not be the case in case Napoleon would take the initiative himself, by attacking the allies in a key sector before they would be able to invade France themselves on a wide front, i.e. from the north and east of France. The general aim would be to destabilize the coalition by gaining a victory over a part of it. A success would not only most probably disrupt the allied coalition – and this was even as much as important - it would also strengthen his position within France. And given the political situation this is what he needed given the hostility of the chambers and the open or smouldering royalist feelings in parts of the country. At the same time, if this very chance would turn into a serious defeat it might accelerate his loss of power, not only from a military, but also from a political point of view: it would bring upon him all his domestic enemies in the government and the Chambre.⁷

The choice for an offensive in the north.

For Napoleon, weighing all arguments for a defensive war eventually did not convince him. Therefore he choose for the option to wage an offensive against the allies before they would make their strike against him. Napoleon took this fundamental decision for the offensive in the early days of May (see below).⁸

In the scenario of an offensive, the option as sketched above would only make sense against those allied forces which were nearest to France and ready to be attacked: these were those in the Netherlands (the armies led by Wellington and Blücher) and those on the Rhine (those of Von Kleist and Schwarzenberg).

Given the forces at his disposal, Napoleon could not afford to fight a war on two fronts. He could tumble the forces on the Rhine, but while doing so he could run the risk of having both Wellington and Blücher enter France in his rear, thereby cutting him off from Paris. Yet, as he would attack both these commander's armies, he assumed succour from the Rhine would not evolve right away.

In addition, Napoleon was well aware that the interests of Britain and Prussia in the Netherlands pulled in different directions, both politically and geographically. Though Napoleon thought Blücher was bold enough, Napoleon deemed Wellington an over-rated and selfish general who would be open for an alliance.

Napoleon had also most of his first-line forces already in northern France and in the Alsace, so that concentration for a major and immediate strike could be more easily concealed in the north than in the east. In throwing the Armée du Nord against only one of the two armies in the Netherlands, Napoleon would be fighting at a numerical equality and probably with a qualitative advantage, with all that meant for his chances. This improvement, however, was dependent upon the time it took for the second army to come to the other's support and thereby restoring predominance to the allies.⁹

An offensive against the Netherlands would, in case of success, turn this territory into French hands, as also parts of the left bank of the Rhine. This not only had a military importance, but also a political one: the newly established kingdom of the Netherlands would be cut up and more, importantly, it would break British interests and access in that area. Also, Louis XVIII would have to seek for a new refuge elsewhere which would further weaken his position.

Further it was Napoleon's hope that the British cabinet would fall as a result and that a peace-minded cabinet would be formed.

On the longer term, a succesful strike against the Netherlands could generate other advantages as well. French influence, having reached towards the Rhine, gave a chance that minor states like Saxony, Bavaria and Württemberg - all former partners of Napoleon – would turn against the allies after all.

There also might be a chance that it would lead Austria and Russia to settle their own terms with Napoleon. On the Rhine front, the allied leaders – czar Alexander, Frederick Wilhelm – had a

long and proven reputation for caution and indecision, of internal rivalries and differing objectives: when threatened they became discouraged and thought of retreat or armistice at once. Politically, Austria could aim at the recognition by Napoleon of the integrity of its borders against Prussian and Russian actions, while a recognition of Napoleon by the czar could give prospects for the recognition of Poland as Russian territory. In this way, Napoleon could make use of the individual interests of the main powers of the fourth coalition.¹⁰

The options for an offensive in the north.

For the invasion of the Netherlands, several options were open for Napoleon. In a general sense, he must have been informed about the development of the allied cantonments, their strengths and their lines of retreat.

First of all, he could invade it in the sector between the sea and the river Scheldt. It is basically a virtually flat area, and therefore easy for manoeuvring. Access was possible through several major paved roads leading from Lille to Ghent (either through Menin and Courtrai, or through Tournai and Audenarde), or to Brussels (through either Courtrai and Audenarde or Tournai and Audenarde).

Yet, at the same time this sector was cut up by canals, inundations and *places fortes* so therefore also favourable for defence.

Though Ghent would be virtually uncovered, it could be expected that Wellington would take up defensive positions along the Scheldt and / or Dendre to protect Brussels and his line of retreat towards Antwerp. In sufficiently delaying the French advance, it would also allow the Prussians to advance from the east for a possible joint action in front of Brussels.

By mentioning Lille in his memoirs, Napoleon meant an attack towards Tournai and as he describes it, this offensive would only drive Wellington back to his centre while at the same time giving the Prussians to concentrate and to unite with Wellington, something Napoleon wanted to avoid at all costs.

In reality, it should be taken into account, however, that Napoleon must have been aware of the principal lines of retreat of Wellington and Blücher, i.e. to the north (Antwerp) and the Meuse.¹¹

Another option was an invasion upon Wellington's sector between the rivers Scheldt and Sambre. Here, the flat part of Flanders runs into the slightly undulating plains of Hainaut and Brabant. Having no larger cities and no other rivers, this sector was also suited for manoeuvring while access was granted through several major roads as well. From Condé, Valenciennes and Maubeuge direct roads ran towards Brussels through Mons, Braine le Comte and Halle. Others ran from Condé and Lille through Tournai, Ath and Enghien to Brussels, while another one led from Condé and Maubeuge through Binche and Nivelles to Brussels. Further east, one led from Charleroi to Brussels..

As the western part of the sector was screened by the river Scheldt, access from the line Valenciennes - Bavay - Maubeuge was the most easy. Having concentrated observation corps there since March, the element of surprise was out of the question. An offensive along the axe Valenciennes – Mons would most probably have Wellington concentrate his forces around Braine le Comte or, deeper down, just in front of Brussels. Though the element of surprise of an offensive from here was absent, if it would be swift one it might give the possibility of at least destroying part of Wellington's forces thereby forcing him to pull back upon the capital or even further, towards Antwerp. In such a scenario, the Prussian army would not be able to turn up in time to assist Wellington, if they would be willing to move towards Wellington that far at all.¹² On the other hand, if Wellington would make a stand in front of Brussels, Blücher might attempt to move in Napoleon's rear.

Within the same sector, there was also a possibility of moving along the axe formed by the Roman road. This road formed the demarcation line between the allied armies. Making a powerful thrust along this road would most probably pierce their frontline, each allied army falling back upon its centre instinctively. For Wellington, this would in all probability be the area around Braine le Comte and for Blücher one around Sombreffe or further east. It gave Napoleon the chance to move against Wellington with the majority of his army before Blücher would be able to join him.

The right bank of the Sambre also offered possibilities for an offensive, though far more limited due to the hilly and cut-up character of the area. It is dominated by the extensions of the Ardennes, as far as the river Moselle.

Access in this region was possible by major roads leading from Philippeville to Charleroi and those leading from Givet to Namur and from Givet –through Ciney - to Liège. For Napoleon, it was an option to move along both banks of the Meuse, towards Ciney and Dinant, thereby attempting to turn and annihilate Thielmann's 3rd corps. However, such an operation was more delicate, took more time and was uncertain in its outcome. And what was more, the problem was how to fix Blücher and to cross his line of defence (the Sambre), by attacking him in front and in flank, while at the same time preventing him from extracting himself to a decisive blow before Wellington could possibly reach the theatre of war.¹³

Another option stood open for Napoleon, as coming from the right bank of the Sambre: it was the one, covered by the river Sambre, to fall upon Charleroi by surprise and to attack the Prussian army there. It was this option which Napoleon chose for.

The choice for the offensive through Charleroi.

Before entering into the actual scenario of the offensive through Charleroi, I would like to make a step back in time in order to show the time-frame Napoleon went through from early May onwards, the moment he concentrated the Armée du Nord as a *masse de manoeuvre* in the north.

After the general threat of an invasion at the northern frontier late April, it became apparent to Napoleon around the same time that the invasion of France had been fixed by the allies on the 1st of June. During the month of April there are no references in Napoleon's correspondence to any offensive actions whatsoever. The formation of the Armée du Nord in the north was a preventive action to make sure he had a *masse de manoeuvre* to work with in case of such an invasion in the north of the country. Yet, this did not materialize.

Being aware of the date set for the allied invasion, Napoleon must have started considering to make a strike in the north with the Armée du Nord before that time (the 1st of June). The time needed for this army to concentrate on its centre was calculated to be about 10 days.¹⁴ For an offensive starting late May, it would mean that the first orders for such a concentration should be issued by mid-May.

As far as can be ascertained, it was on the 9th of May that Napoleon made a first written reference to a possible offensive as he wrote to Davout: [...] Le général Vandamme doit réunir son corps, comme j'ai déjà prescrit, du côté de Rocroy et de Philippeville. Vous lui ferez connaître qu'il fait partie de l'armée du Nord; qu'il doit pouvoir s'y réunir sur la Sambre, où je me trouverai probablement moi-même, afin d'agir avec de grandes masses.[...]"¹⁵ The same day, he nominated Soult as chief of staff for the armée du Nord.¹⁶

So, by then he had set his mind upon moving against the enemy in the north with his armée du Nord, but the point where he would do so was still to be determined. It means that it was probably in the first days of May that Napoleon decided for an offensive in the north.¹⁷

On the 13th of May, Napoleon wanted to be informed about the width of the canals of Condé, of the river Scheldt near Mons, of the river Sambre near Charleroi, of the canal of Brughe and of that of Brussels and of the river Meuse near Maastricht.¹⁸ This request is no doubt linked to his request from two days before for the establishment of pontoons into the Armée du Nord, meant for the construction of bridges over the rivers Scheldt and Sambre, as well as the canals in the Netherlands.

The fact that Napoleon had made up his mind in the sense that *he* would fix the date of war and not the allies can be read from what he wrote to Davout on the 16th of May: “La guerre va avoir lieu, et le soldat ne pourra pas entrer en campagne avec quatre jours de pain.[..]”¹⁹

It should be born in mind that at that moment Napoleon had learned about the new date set for the invasion: the 16th of June. This delay allowed Napoleon to postpone his offensive in a parallel way.

Somewhere late May Napoleon must have fixed his offensive at the middle (14th) of June, as becomes clear from what he wrote to Davout on the 27th of May in relation to the formation of artillery in Paris [...] Voyez si on ne pourrait pas former aux Invalides quatre compagnies de canoniers qu'on exercerait sur-le-champ au canon. Je désire que ce mouvement commence lundi prochain, 29, et soit achevé, comme je viens de le dire, au 5 juin, parce que je voudrais que cela se fit avant les hostilités, afin que l'opération se continuant ensuite jusqu'au 10 juin, il n'en résulte aucune inquiétude ni commotion dans l'opinion.[...]"²⁰

On the 9th of June, Davout wrote to general Jourdan at Besançon: “Monsieur le maréchal, tout annonce que les hostilités sont imminentes. La garde est partie de Paris; les troupes étrangères arrivent sur nos frontières [..]”²¹

It meant that he now still had time until somewhere early June to start the concentration of the Armée du Nord.

On the 22nd of May, Napoleon wrote to Soult in two different letters: “Mon cousin, demandez six ingénieurs des ponts et chaussées qui connaissent dans le plus grand détail toutes les routes et les localités des départements de la Belgique et de la rive gauche du Rhin; attachez-les à la suite de l'état-major général.” [...] “Mon cousin, faites connaître au général Vandamme que son emplacement sous Chimay démasque trop son mouvement; que de Rocroy, par Couvin, il ne se trouve qu'à six lieues de Philippeville. Si je prenais l'offensive par la gauche, le centre se trouverait à Philippeville, tandis que la gauche se trouverait à Maubeuge. Il faut donc que la route de Rocroy à Philippeville soit libre, et le poste de Mariembourg l'assure parfaitement. [..]”²²

These statements make clear that Napoleon had by then not yet decided in detail where to attack in the north, but taking into account on what Napoleon wrote on the 22nd of May, it must have been somewhere between this date and the end of May that Napoleon fixed the attack through *Charleroi* and not some other place on the Sambre. It was then to take place on the 14th of June, just before the allies were supposed to invade France.²³

Meanwhile, somewhere in the third week of May, however, this same army was drained with 10.000 men for their mission to the Vendée, and this obliged Napoleon to neutralize this loss by involving other forces for his offensive in the north.

Then, Napoleon must have considered to pull the armée de la Moselle towards him, but at least by the 25th of May he had not taken a full decision, as then he wrote to Soult that it was his intention that Gérard would hold his “entire army corps in column, between Thionville and Metz, so as to be able to move according to circumstances and the orders he may receive, either to manoeuvre with the Armée du Rhin, or to close upon the armée du Nord, crossing the Meuse.”²⁴

Napoleon decided to use the armée de la Moselle for his campaign in the Netherlands between the 25th of May and the 5th of June, the moment he ordered it towards his main army.

Somehow, Napoleon must have expected more of an offensive through Charleroi than anywhere else, so he must have had good reasons for doing so.²⁵ The basic question is: what was the surplus value of Charleroi over other options ?

About his choice to launch his offensive towards the Sambre through Charleroi, Napoleon himself writes:

“Pour attaquer les deux armées ennemies, les français pouvaient déborder leur droite, leur gauche et percer leur centre. Dans le premier cas, ils déboucheraient par Lille, et rencontreraient l’armée anglo-hollandaise: dans le second, ils déboucheraient par Givet et Charlemont, et rencontreraient l’armée Prusso-Saxonne. Ces deux armées restaient réunies, puisqu’elles seraient pressées l’une sur l’autre, de la droite sur la gauche, et de la gauche sur la droite. L’empereur adopta le parti de couvrir ses mouvements par la Sambre, et de percer la ligne des deux armées à Charleroi, point de leur jonction, manoeuvrant avec rapidité et habileté. Il trouva ainsi dans les secrets de l’art des moyens supplémentaires qui lui tinrent lieu de cent mille hommes qui lui manquaient; ce plan fut conçu et exécuté avec audace et sagesse.”²⁶

Whatever one can think of the courage and wisdom with which the manoeuvre was carried out, the element which stands out is the one of surprise. It is described in such an extent that it would in fact neutralize French numerical inferiority. The 100.000 men may be an exaggeration, but the difference in numbers in reality was material and there is no doubt that Napoleon must have expected a lot from the sudden character of an attack towards the Sambre at Charleroi.²⁷

As has been shown above, faced with superior numbers, the very basic principle for Napoleon for the campaign was that he would be able to deal with both opponents separately. Obviously, in the contrary sense, the principle for the allies was mutual cooperation as their only chance of success. As such, their individual freedom of movement was considerable, but at the same its limitation was this very cooperation.²⁸

Napoleon’s high expectation of the element of surprise was based upon the extended cantonments of both allied armies; their commanders simply would need time to concentrate their armies.²⁹ In falling upon the Prussian army first (see below), Napoleon expected them either to confront him near the Sambre or to fall back without a fight upon the Meuse. In the second case, they would move away from Wellington which is just what he wanted, while in the first case Napoleon counted that Blücher would not be able to concentrate his *full* army in time to fight Napoleon there, thereby considerably adding up to the chances of a French victory. Basically, it meant a partial Prussian concentration towards the Sambre in front of Napoleon’s main army. Time would tell whether Blücher wanted to take this risk.

One of Napoleon’s many axioms of war reads: “Ne faites pas ce que veut l’ennemi, par la seule raison qu’il désire; évitez le camp de bataille qu’il a reconnu, étudié, et encore avec plus de soin celui qu’il a fortifié, où il s’est retranché.”³⁰

Obviously, Napoleon must have been aware of this principle in this case, but the combination of his own speed and surprise on the one hand and a Prussian lack of forces in such a chosen position on the other, must have convinced him to fall upon them through Charleroi.

The axioma evidently applied in the same way to his other opponent, Wellington. If he would choose for a partial concentration on his extreme left wing, he would take a similar risk, particularly in case Napoleon would turn his main army against him right from the start. In general, it can be assumed that Napoleon must have been aware of Wellington’s more cautious and methodical approach, contrary to the more impetuous and offensive character of Blücher, so this may have played a role in the premisses upon which Napoleon built his plan for the campaign in the Netherlands.

Napoleon had to move through a hilly, forested and broken area through which access to Charleroi the Sambre was not that easy, and this element could only add to the surprise of the enemy if he would.³¹

Napoleon's plan for the campaign in the Netherlands.

In general, it was not Napoleon's custom to show the actual concept of his plan for a campaign; he kept it for himself, and the campaign of 1815 was no exception. Therefore, any contemporary references to this concept are virtually non-existent. Additionally, to derive the plan from the later sequence of events in the campaign itself is most detrimental to any serious attempt for a description of this plan.

For a start, in taking into account that the Russian and Austrian armies would invade France by the end of June, it meant that Napoleon had two weeks time to crush his enemies in the Netherlands. That was the time-schedule Napoleon was dealing with.

Houssaye says about the manoeuvre towards Charleroi: "Par une des de ses plus belles conceptions stratégiques, l'empereur résolu de se porter hardiment au centre même des cantonnements ennemis, sur le point présumé de concentration des Anglo-Prussiens. La route de Charleroi à Bruxelles formant la ligne de contact des deux armées, c'est sur cette route que Napoleon comptait fondre, par Beaumont et Philippeville, avec la rapidité de la foudre."³²

Whatever in this version this *point présumé de concentration* may have been, the suggestion that the road leading from Charleroi to Brussels was the demarcation-line between both allied armies is simply incorrect as this was - as I have shown - the Roman road.

Napoleon himself describes Charleroi as the *point de jonction* of both allied armies, but in real life he must have been very well aware that his attack was directed upon the right flank of the *Prussian* army, and not one on the exact point where it joined Wellington's army.³³ Actually, he writes to his brother Joseph on the 14th of June: "Demain 15 [juin] je me porterai sur Charleroi, où est l'armée Prussienne, ce qui donnera lieu à une bataille ou à la retraite de l'ennemi."³⁴

And to Davout he wrote the same day: "Je passerai la Sambre demain 15. Si les Prussiens n'évacuent pas, nous aurons une bataille."³⁵

It is clear from these words that he expected either to have a confrontation with the Prussians at the Sambre river, or their retreat towards the Meuse. Either way, it was his intention to throw them to the east, away from Wellington.³⁶

In this context fits the principle as Napoleon describes it in his letter to Ney on the morning of the 16th of June. It says: "J'ai adopté pour principe général dans cette campagne de diviser mon armée en deux ailes et une réserve. [...] La garde formera la réserve et je me porterai sur l'une ou l'autre aile, selon les circonstances. [...] Selon les circonstances, j'affaiblirai l'une ou l'autre aile en augmentant ma réserve. Vous sentez assez l'importance attachée à la prise de Bruxelles. Cela pourra, d'ailleurs, donner lieu à des incidents; car un mouvement aussi prompt et aussi brusque isolera l'armée anglaise de Mons, Ostende etc.etc."³⁷

Though taken from a document written during the campaign, this passage refers back to a general and basic principle of the campaign as Napoleon had laid it down before he started it, called the "strategy of the central position." As such, it forms the cornerstone in the way he expected to deal with both enemy armies separately.

The strategy of the central position, as used by Napoleon before, was built upon two elements: surprise and security. First of all, the enemy should have no idea about the number of French forces opposing him and what intentions they had, and secondly the important pre-action moves were to be secured by natural and military cover. The element of surprise has been stressed before.

Within this scheme, it was Napoleon's strategy to divide his force into an advance guard, two wings and a reserve, and this is what he did in 1815. After the initial advance, it was the trick to seize a central position between the components of the enemy's forces, from which Napoleon would be able to set out to defeat both opponents in detail.

Having made a firm contact with the surprised foe, Napoleon could use a part of his total force to tie down and occupy the attention of each enemy force. Then, still retaining the initiative, he could move his reserve, and if necessary part of a wing, to build up a local superiority on one battlefield or the other.

Within this approach, the use of part of the other wing was called the "*manoeuvre sur les derrières*." In that case, Napoleon induced the opponent to advance against what he was led to believe a holding action on that sector, while the bulk of the army swept around the enemy in forced marches, compelling him either to surrender or to give battle with no satisfactory line of retreat.

Then, after the defeating the first enemy, Napoleon would leave a detachment to pursue the survivors and counter-march with the remainder and the reserve to repeat the process on the second battlefield. Of course, correct timing was essential. If too long time elapsed before the reserve could reach the second battlefield, the embattled French pinning force might well go under, and the victorious foe swing forward to envelop the French rear.³⁸

In theory, once having gained the central position the priority for striking at one of the enemy armies could either go to Wellington or to Blücher, but in this particular case, in combining the element of the attack on the *Prussian* army first, it becomes clear that Napoleon must have reckoned to deal in this way with Blücher first, pursue him with part of his forces, and then to deal with Wellington – presuming of course both generals would confront the French army.

Whatever the allies would do (confront him or not), after he had made sure that they would not be able to join forces, Napoleon's first main target for the campaign in the Netherlands was to seize its capital, Brussels. The way he describes it in the same letter, he saw the occupation of this city through a swift and blunt offensive as a very important instrument in the disruption of the allied cooperation in the Netherlands and eventually in the possible political – and herewith military - destabilisation of the allied coalition.³⁹

The way Napoleon saw it, in case a success in the Netherlands would not bring peace, he would then move with the *Armée du Nord* - reinforced with the *Armée du Rhin* and reinforcements from the interior - against the Russian and Austrian armies on the Rhine.⁴⁰

In case things would not work out the way Napoleon had designed them to unroll in the Netherlands, a defensive war could be waged after all, in the system as it was set up right from the moment he had returned in Paris.⁴¹ For this reason, Napoleon continued to work on the defence of the country even while he was busy concentrating his *armée du Nord* for the offensive in the Netherlands.

For instance, on the 6th of June, he ordered Suchet, through Davout, to establish a *camp militaire* between Génève and Lyon from the 10th of June onwards as a defence against the threat as coming from Switzerland. In addition, Suchet was also supposed to assemble his forces in front of Chambéry between the 10th and the 15th of June.⁴²

At the same time, Napoleon had Davout make further arrangements for the completion by the 15th of June of the artillery at the bridges of the river Saône, around Lyon and at Chateau-Thierry, Langres, Vitry, Laon and Soissons.⁴³

And on the 9th of June Napoleon wrote to Davout: "Il est bien important qu'au 13 Juin, pour tout délai, toutes les gardes nationales des places de première ligne du Nord, du Rhin, du Jura soient parfaitement armés, surtout celle du Nord et de la Meuse. Il est important aussi que vous me fassiez connaître si, au 13 Juin, il se trouvera des convois de poudre, armes, canons,

etc. à portée des frontières du Nord, et qui soient exposés à être enlevés par des partis ennemis.”⁴⁴

For the defence of Paris, Davout received from Napoleon on the 11th of June the following instruction: “158 canons de la marine sont arrivés à Paris. Faites en sorte qu’il se trouvent en batterie avant le 20. Il en arrivera 80 autres d’ici au 20. Il est important que les 240 pièces soient en batterie vers le 20, afin que je sois absolument sans inquiétude pour la ville de Paris [..].”⁴⁵ This last remark was all too clear in case a defensive war had to be waged after all.

It was at Laon on the 12th of June that Napoleon wrote to Davout about the defence line along the Marne, as it was just then that he requested him to make a full report on all reconnaissances which had taken place along that river – from its source to its mouth - in the sense of bridges, bridge-heads, fords, armament etc.⁴⁶

And it was on the 14th of June that Napoleon issued further instructions for defensive measures to be taken, for instance by general Suchet at Montmélian and Lyon and by Davout himself in Paris (to make sure about the presence of sufficient artillery before the 25th of June).

General Lecourbe was supposed to defend the Rhine first, then the Vosges and the Jura, Belfort, Langres and the rivers Saône, Aube, Seine and - eventually - the Yonne.

Suchet, eventually, had to defend Lyon, the Saône and the Rhône, while Rapp was to fight a defensive war by using consecutive positions in the Alsace, the Vosges, and then along the rivers Meurthe, Moselle, Meuse and Marne. In this, he had to keep in touch with general Belliard (on the Meurthe and Moselle) and Lecourbe (at the Swiss border).⁴⁷

Napoleon himself says about his plan that he intended to attack, separate and beat both the Anglo-German-Netherlands and Prussian army.⁴⁸

In order to act from a central position *between* both armies - presuming these formed a closed front - it was obviously necessary for Napoleon to create such a position. This has led in the historiography of the campaign to a discussion about the concept of the expression that Napoleon “threw himself between both armies in order to separate them.”

Von Clausewitz regards this expression in military terminology as a *terminus technicus*, as one which basically lacks a clear idea of what is actually meant. He understands the principle as one in which the interval between two armies itself can never be the object of military operations; for him it would be as if Napoleon “auf den leeren Zwischenraum träfe und also einen Lufthieb thäte” which would be a very precious loss of time in a delicate situation with two opponents. His axioma is that all operations were to be directed to one determining element: the decisive battle, in this case with the Prussians first.⁴⁹

Grouard, in his reaction on Von Clausewitz, launches the concept of the “*rupture stratégique*.” In his view, in order to beat each allied army individually, it was simply necessary to split them first and then to cling to both of them in the way as it has been described above. It was the trick to create an interval first and then to use it by beating one army at the time with the main force, while the other opponent would be occupied by a secondary force. If there would have been an interval between both allied armies already for some reason or another, it would have been the most efficient to exploit it.⁵⁰

Lenient, in his turn, approaches the subject more pragmatically and as a result he regards the “*rupture stratégique*” as too rigid and abstract. For him, what counts is a concept built upon elements such as time, space and other circumstances of the moment. First of all, Lenient points to the fact that Charleroi was not the centre of the allied positions, so - in that sense - an attack there could never be an actual decisive *rupture stratégique*. In that scenario Napoleon could also not be certain that the allies armies would not attempt to unite. Here Lenient presumes that they would concentrate at Quatre Bras and Sombreffe respectively, and this – as I will demonstrate below – was not automatically the case. This brings Lenient to conclude that - realistically - all that could be expected was a battle with the Prussian army.⁵¹

Yet, it was not that Napoleon was seeking for such a confrontation *by all means*, as Von Clausewitz sees it. As Napoleon writes himself, the attack upon Charleroi would either result in a battle at the Sambre or a Prussian retreat. What counted for Napoleon was not a battle *per se*, but the fact that he would be able to place himself there, where he would be able to act against any enemy's intentions.

Lenient sees the manoeuvre through Charleroi as one of which the advantages have often been exaggerated and its drawbacks neglected. His main reasoning for this is that if there would be a confrontation with Blücher, this then would be one of which Blücher would have decided *where* to fight it, and this situation would not be in favour of Napoleon; the only things which could neutralize this situation were the tardy reaction of the allied armies and a swift and crushing French victory.⁵²

Yet, it was just upon these very principles that Napoleon built his plan for the campaign: an incomplete concentration of the opposing armies on the one hand and a French sudden attack upon them on the other. This combination would be the key to victory.

According to Lenient it was for Napoleon impossible to create a so-called *zone de manoeuvres* stratégique as there was simply not enough space to do this in relation to the allied concentration points. As this idea upon which this reasoning is based is incorrect, this theory fails.⁵³ In fact, if for Lenient a *rupture stratégique* would normally require an interval of about 40 to 45 kilometers, then this could have been possible if Napoleon had thrown his right wing towards and beyond Sombreffe and his left towards Braine le Comte. But the fact was that he did not. As a matter of fact, in reality the interval between both these points was the one both allied commanders were using as a starting point in their arrangements from where they would cooperate if Napoleon would act in the allied centre.⁵⁴

Napoleon versus Wellington and Blücher: strengths.

I have mentioned the strengths of the allied armies in relation to Napoleon's option of a defensive war. Obviously, these strengths played an important role in the consideration of this option, but of course also for the option of an offensive war.

It is of the greatest importance to reconstruct how Napoleon distributed the forces he expected to have by the time the offensive was about to start, and why he did so. In this distribution, a distinction should be made between the active, mobile army and the auxiliary army. The core of the question is in what degree parts of the active army were kept by Napoleon in those units functioning as a screen on the frontiers and why, as this influenced the strength of his active army in his offensive war.

Yet, to do this, first of all, one is faced with a lack of contemporary sources. By the time Napoleon chose for an offensive on his northern frontier early May, no data about the strength of the French mobile and auxiliary armies are available. These figures can only be confirmed by the beginning of June and summarizing they can be estimated to be around 175-180.000 men for the active army and about 210.000 men for the auxiliary army.⁵⁵

Late March, the only resources Napoleon had available for the increase of his forces were those to return from a limited or unlimited leave (32.800 men) and deserters (85.000 men). Davout's expectation, however, was that in all probability some 59.000 would turn out.⁵⁶

Of these 117.800 men, 82.560 were called for and by early June of these, 52.446 men had been listed, while 23.448 were on their way to their units. Additionally, some 15.000 volunteers enlisted.

The call upon the navy to contribute to the field forces resulted in the period from the 25th of April until the 15th of June in the establishment of nine regiments of *marins*, five battalions of artillery and five companies of *ouvriers militaires du génie*, totalling 12.547 men. Results of recruiting were not satisfactory due to the fact that some coastal areas had royalist sympathies.

On paper, the national guard would consist of 3131 battalions, in all more than two million men. Of those, in the period between the 10th of April and the 10th of May, 461 battalions were called up, i.e. 331.920 men, but recruitment proved to be hard and battalions were not on their full strength. The result was that the call was adjusted on the 19th of May to 423 battalions (304.560 men) and by mid June 284 battalions - some 150.000 men - were assembled in the armies or on their way to the depots.⁵⁷

By early May, the moment Napoleon made up his mind about the fundamental choice what type of war it would be, he set all his priorities to the increase of the strength of the mobile army. Mobile forces which were used as garrisons in *places fortes* were to be relieved by auxiliary forces, while additional measures were taken to enlarge the mobile army.

For example by mid May, so after Napoleon had decided for an offensive war in the north, soldiers who were on retirement were called up. In theory these could deliver about 94.000 men, but by mid June the total number did not exceed 20.000 men.

The formation of foreign units, initiated in April, did not deliver more than 4000 men, but the majority of these units were still *en dépôt* and unfit for war. The *tirailleurs fédérés*, however, were easily formed from the middle of May onwards (some 17.000 in Paris and 4000 in Lyon), but their equipment was defective.

Finally as the class of 1815 was summoned late May, this resulted in about 46.000 men (of the expected 120.000) but these were not available for the active army in time for the campaign which was to start on the 14th of June (see above).

The résumé given above shows the problems Napoleon was faced with in the formation of his forces and the time-constraints he was in, due to an imminent allied invasion. It doesn't help, however, in determining the factors Napoleon used for the calculation and distribution of these forces, and in particular for those he reserved against his enemies in the Netherlands.

Somehow, however, Napoleon apparently must have considered 125.000 men sufficient for the war in the Netherlands.⁵⁸

In his memoirs, Napoleon assigns the armies of Wellington and Blüchers strengths of 104.000 and 120.000 men respectively. To oppose them he puts 140.000 men in the Armée du Nord. Other than that these figures are too high in themselves, they do not reflect their situation early May. By then both the Anglo-German-Netherlands and Prussian armies may have counted about 120.000 men in total. It should also not be forgotten that by the moment Napoleon developed his offensive plan, a major increase of his mobile forces was yet to take place.⁵⁹

The formula in the difference of the quality of the armies, and not in their strengths as such, is expressed by Napoleon as "qu'un Anglais pouvait être compté pour un Français, deux Hollandais, Prussiens ou hommes de la confédération, pour un Français." Resulting, he comes to an effective strength in qualities of both allied armies of 140.000 in total.⁶⁰

In the quality of the French army relative to the allied armies his arrogance goes further by stating about their numerical superiority and his own way to handle this: "[...] L'empereur adopta le parti de couvrir ses mouvements par la Sambre, et de percer la ligne des deux armées à Charleroi, point de leur jonction, manoeuvrant avec rapidité et habileté. Il trouva ainsi dans les secrets de l'art des moyens supplémentaires qui lui tinrent lieu de cent mille hommes qui lui manquaient; ce plan fut conçu et exécuté avec audace et sagesse."⁶¹

Whether the plan was executed in the way as Napoleon suggests is something which will be dealt with in further chapters, but to state that the element of surprise would count for balancing out 100.000 men is way over the top.

In former French victorious battles where the enemy had a strong numerical superiority over the French, the ratio varied from roughly 1 : 1.1 to 1 : 1.6 (French forces : Allied forces). In the case of the campaign of 1815 - in taking into account that the armée du Nord eventually counted 125.000 men - this would mean that Napoleon would have calculated the total number of both allied armies in the Netherlands to be maximum 210.000 men strong, but this

model is of course mere rough speculation, as it doesn't take into account the way the forces increased in time on both sides.⁶²

In the discussion about a concentration against Wellington and Blücher, Napoleon is sometimes blamed for not having pulled the armée du Rhin towards him for use in the campaign in the Netherlands.

An argument is that Rapp, with his 19.000 men, was now used for a secondary purpose, which was detrimental to a maximal concentration, needed for a decisive manoeuvre in the north. And in case of an invasion, Rapp would be too weak anyway to resist the vast numbers of Schwarzenberg's forces. Additionally, in case of misfortune in the Netherlands, he would not be able to come to the aid of Napoleon, being tied down himself by the allied invasion.

On the other hand, there were also good reasons for Napoleon to keep Rapp where he was. To remove the armée du Rhin would not only expose the Alsace and Lorraine to the allied forces, it was just this area which was an important sector for them to invade France. In that sense, Rapp's absence would destabilize the general defense line in the east of the country. Also, the removal of Rapp's army would make a weak impression upon the local population.

From a military point of view, it was important that a march towards the centre of the northern frontier would strongly diminish the element of surprise in the concentration of the armée du Nord there. From its great length (just more than 400 kilometers) it would be simply impossible to mask it from enemy detection.⁶³

As I have shown, it was on the 25th of May that Napoleon instructed general Gérard to concentrate his entire army corps before the 1st of June in columns between Thionville and Metz, either to manoeuvre with the Armée du Rhin, or to close upon the armée du Nord. At the same time, on the 23rd of May, Napoleon also instructed Rapp to be ready, from the 5th of June onwards, to put his corps in motion within a time-frame of two hours.⁶⁴

Was Napoleon in doubt where to use the armée de la Moselle, for the armée du Rhin he apparently wasn't. This stems from the fact that Rapp would need at least 14 days to cover the distance involved and that implied that Napoleon would have had to send out march-orders by the 26th or 27th of May in case he had wished him to be with the armée du Nord by the 14th of June.⁶⁵ It was now just three days before this date that he ordered him to be ready for a possible departure within two hours from the 5th of June onwards. In this intention it becomes clear that Rapp was supposed to play a role in case things would not work out in the Netherlands as they were supposed to do. In other words: Rapp was to take his part in the defensive war which would then take place.

Eventually, Rapp neither received orders to move towards Napoleon, nor to leave his positions on the 5th of June. It was on the 14th of June that orders left imperial headquarters for his grand strategy in a defensive war (see above).

To blame Napoleon for not having used the armée du Rhin for his war in the Netherlands right from the beginning is in my mind a conclusion drawn too easily as it is one drawn from hindsight. Other than that, there is no authentic evidence on the proportions Napoleon worked from in the configuration of his armée du Nord in relation to his opponents, therefore any remarks in this respect should be handled with care.

¹ Mémoires pour servir etc. p.38

² It was late in April that this news was communicated to Blücher and Wellington, and there is no reason to suppose that Napoleon would not have acquired this important information as well.

³ Cf. previous footnote for the same assumption, but then for this time-frame. The postponement of the invasion towards late June, as communicated to Wellington and Blücher on the 13th of June most probably did not reach Napoleon in time before he started his war against these commanders.

⁴ Napoleon – and Gourgaud with him - claims that the allies could not be ready before the 15th of July, but that they could possibly do so on the 1st of July, as a result of his own attack on the 15th of June. This is a mere bluff.

In: Mémoires etc. p.53-56, 60

Gourgaud. La campagne de 1815 p.21

As the invasion was planned for late June / early July, the allies could not be expected in the vicinity of Paris before late in July. By that time, Paris itself would contain a garrison of some 83.000 men, composed of 30.000 regular troops, 17.000 tirailleurs and 35.000 national guards.

The mobile army in front of the city would at that moment count about 200.000 men, while there would be about 75.000 men would be in the depots and 158.000 men in recruitment.

The total of 200.000 is calculated by adding up 13.934 men who were *en route*, 59.559 men who were in the depots, 8162 men from the hospitals, 19.000 *rappelés ayant reçu leurs feuilles de route* and 46.500 conscripts of the class of 1815. This brings 147.000 men of which Napoleon could use some 80.000 men in about 6 weeks time, of which 30.000 for the defence of Paris and 50.000 for the mobile army. These 50.000 men to be added up by the other parts of active army (the Armée du Nord and the Armée de la Moselle, both 144.000) brings a total of almost 200.000 men.

The 80.000 men were composed of 67.000 men of the 147.000 and of one third of the 25.000 soldiers in retirement, while the 158.000 were composed of 74.000 men forming the addition of the class of 1815 and 84.000 forming the addition of *the levée des gardes nationales mobiles*. In: Houssaye, H. 1815.Waterloo p.96-97

Napoleon calculates the Armée du Nord, the Armée de la Moselle and the Armée du Rhin to be about 250.000 strong by the middle of August. These were supposed to be acting in front of Paris, while then 60.000 men would then be in front of Lyon. In: Mémoires etc. p.328

Regnault calculates 284.000 men to be present by the 10th of June, but of which only some 195.000 were actually available for the armies and the observation corps. Yet, of those, some 14.000 would be *en route* between their depots and their regiment, of which perhaps some 4 to 5000 would have arrived by the 14th of June. His total therefore comes to 185.000 on that date.

In comparing this total to Houssaye's total of 200.000 on the 1st of July, the increase would have been about 20.000 men in two weeks time. In: Regnault, J.B. - La campagne de 1815; mobilisation et concentration p.129

⁵ Cf. Charras, J.B.A. - Histoire de la campagne de 1815 p.

Napoleon mentions 150.000 men as well, but only for those armies (totalling 600.000)

advancing towards Paris. Those marching against Lyon would have to leave behind about 50.000 (of a total of 150.000). In: Mémoires etc. p.53-56

Houssaye claims of 645.000 men, 150.000 would be needed for the sieges and communication, while another 75.000 would be necessary for the operations against Lyon and the Provence. In: 1815. Waterloo p.97

⁶ Hussey, J. – The terrible choice p.14

⁷ Hussey, J. The terrible choice p.14

⁸ Cf. Gourgaud. La campagne de 1815 p.27

He also claims that Napoleon then chose for the one through Charleroi upon the Netherlands on the 15th of June, but this is not correct, as will be demonstrated.

⁹ Hussey, J. The terrible choice p.14

¹⁰ Hussey, J. The terrible choice p.14

Hamilton-Williams, D. – Waterloo. New perspectives p.170-171

¹¹ Mémoires pour servir etc. p.179-180

¹² Lenient, E. La solution des énigmes de Waterloo p.107

Charras sees this option as well, but doesn't explain its difficulties clear enough. In: Histoire de la campagne de 1815 p.96

¹³ Lenient, E. La solution des énigmes de Waterloo p.109

¹⁴ Cf. the concentration of the armée du nord in June.

¹⁵ Correspondance etc. nr.21879

¹⁶ Chuquet, A. – Ordres et apostilles de Napoleon Vol.IV nr.577

¹⁷ This is corroborated by Gourgaud, who states the decision was taken during the first days of May. In: La campagne de 1815 p.27

Napoleon himself writes: “dans le courant de Mai [...] l'empereur médita sur le plan de campagne qu'il aurait à suivre.” In this process he refers to the choice for a defensive or an offensive war, the mutual numerical strengths, the royalist rise and its possible implications, the time-frame of the allied invasion etc. In: Mémoires pour servir etc. p.57-60

¹⁸ Correspondance etc. nr.21900

¹⁹ Correspondance etc. nr.21915

²⁰ Mauduit, H.de - Les derniers jours etc. Vol.I p.416

Regnault incorrectly believes that it was on the 3rd of June that Napoleon decided for the 14th of June to start the campaign in the north. In: La campagne de 1815; mobilisation et concentration p.200-201

²¹ Mazade, Ch. De – Correspondance Vol.IV nr.1754

²² Correspondance etc. nr.21954, 21955

²³ Houssaye, basing himself upon the same documents as I do, states that Napoleon fixed his “plan de campagne” by mid-May at the earliest. By doing so, however, he ignores the steps which characterized the development of this concept: it was a gradual process, evolving from the fundamental choice for an offensive as such, to one in the north, to one in the centre of this sector and eventually leading to an attack through Charleori, and fixed on the 14th of June. In: 1815. Waterloo p.90

²⁴ Callataj, Ph. de - The concentration of the French army for the campaign of June 1815 p.23

²⁵ Lenient, E. – La solution des énigmes de Waterloo p.112

²⁶ Mémoires pour servir etc. p.179-180

²⁷ As will be shown below, the concentration of the Armée du Nord was veiled in secrecy by the use of the terrain, diversions in secondary theatres, forced marches, communication being cut off etc.

The fact that Napoleon deemed the element of surprise as the basic one of his offensive can be taken from his claim that he did surprise his opponents. In: Mémoires pour servir etc. p.179

²⁸ This is why Napoleon criticized Wellington later for accepting a battle at Waterloo, while Prussian support was not certain for the full hundred percent. In his mind, “ce parti était contraire aux intérêts de sa nation, au plan général de guerre adopté par les alliés; il violait toutes les règles de la guerre. [...] Le plan de guerre des Alliés consistait à agir en masse et à ne s’engager dans aucune affaire partielle.” In: Mémoires pour servir etc. p.193-194

²⁹ Napoleon severely criticizes both Wellington and Blücher for taking up positions at Quatre Bras and Sombreffe respectively, because of the risk of a partial concentration. Though written after the campaign, and as such forming an easy way of diverting the problem to the allies, this very criticism of Napoleon shows that he must have taken these calculations in mind in setting up his plan for the campaign. In: Mémoires pour servir etc. p.189-193

³⁰ Lenient, E. – La solution des énigmes de Waterloo p.115

³¹ Regnault claims Napoleon had reached his goal of an almost complete concentration and the enemy still unsuspecting by the evening of the 12th of June. He was then still master of two options: either to attack through Charleroi or towards Mons. In choosing for Charleroi he had to approach the 4th corps which no longer had to go to Beaumont, but then would form the right wing directed upon Philippeville. If Napoleon would move upon Mons, he was forced to wait for his concentration to complete till the 16th of June and if he would attack on the 14th or the 15th, he would enlarge the distance towards the 4th corps. The fact that Gérard had not reached Rocroi on the 13th caused Napoleon not having the freedom to choose for either of both options. At the same time, Regnault concludes that, whatever happened, the orders of the 13th of June moved the army further east, in view of an advance toward the Basse-Sambre.³¹

The claim that Napoleon’s scenario was optional adds absolutely nothing to the subject: from

the concentration and Napoleon's own words it becomes clear that it was on the Prussians that he wanted to strike. If he would have had an optional scenario at all, then his pattern for the concentration would have asked for completely different measures. All was directed upon a swift advance towards Charleroi at the Sambre in order to surprise the allied armies. In: Mobilisation et concentration p.222-224

³² Houssaye, H. – 1815.Waterloo p.100

³³ Cf. Lachouque, H. – Le secret de Waterloo p.82

Colonel Janin, chief of staff of the 6th corps, writes in the context of the discussion whether Napoleon wanted to penetrate towards Quatre Bras on the 15th of June: “Quoi qu’il en soit, le 15, [...] l’occupation des Quatre Bras devait avoir pour résultat d’attirer l’armée anglaise sur ce point, ce qui était précisément contraire au dessin du général en chef, de commencer par mettre l’armée prussienne hors de cause.” In: Campagne de Waterloo etc. p.14

In a letter dated 19th June 1815, colonel Carmichael Smyth writes - Napoleon having taken Binche and Charleroi – that his objects appears to have been to push between the Prussians and our army.” In: NAK, WO 30.35 nr.55

³⁴ Correspondance etc. nr.22050

³⁵ Correspondance etc. nr.22051

³⁶ Colonel Janin, chief of staff of the 6th corps, confirms that Napoleon wanted to deal with the Prussian army first. Cited in: Coppens, B. Waterloo. les mensonges etc. p.69

Regnault claims Napoleon had reached his goal of an almost complete concentration of the armée du Nord and the enemy still unsuspecting by the evening of the 12th of June. He was then still master of two options: either to attack through Charleroi or towards Mons. In choosing for Charleroi he had to approach the 4th corps which no longer had to go to Beaumont, but then would form the right wing directed upon Philippeville. If Napoleon would move upon Mons, he was forced to wait for his concentration to complete till the 16th of June and if he would attack on the 14th or the 15th, he would enlarge the distance towards the 4th corps. The fact that Gérard had not reached Rocroi on the 13th caused Napoleon not having the freedom to choose for either of both options. At the same time, Regnault concludes that, whatever happened, the orders of the 13th of June moved the army further east, in view of an advance toward the Basse-Sambre. In: La campagne de 1815: mobilisation et concentration p.222-224

The claim that Napoleon's scenario was optional adds absolutely nothing to the subject: from the concentration and Napoleon's own words it becomes clear that it was on the Prussians that he wanted to strike. If he would have had an optional scenario at all, then his pattern for the concentration would have asked for completely different measures. All was directed upon a swift advance towards Charleroi at the Sambre in order to surprise the allied armies.

³⁷ Correspondance, nr.22058

³⁸ Chandler, D. – Waterloo. The hundred days p.75

Rothenberg, G.E. – The art of warfare in the age of Napoleon p.148

Pollio completely misses the point of the strategy of the central position by stating that the strengths of the three columns were dictated by the chance of a confrontation at each column,

i.e. that the centre one would have the largest chance of having one. In: Waterloo p.118

³⁹ Coppens is very seriously misled by the statement from Napoleon that his seizure of Brussels would isolate Wellington from Mons, Ostend etc. Coppens - resulting - thinks that Napoleon thought Wellington stood *east* of the road which connects Brussels and Charleroi. Apart from the fact that Napoleon was not so naive to think that Wellington had most of his forces there, Coppens is too much fixed upon a west-east orientation. The fact was that if Napoleon would take Brussels, Wellington would then in his mind fall back upon Antwerp or Maastricht; in that way he would isolate him from the places as mentioned. In: Waterloo. Les mensonges p.72-73

⁴⁰ Mémoires pour servir etc. p.57-61

⁴¹ Cf. Mémoires pour servir etc. p.60
Thiers, A. – Histoire etc. Vol.VI p.426

⁴² Correspondance nr.22017

⁴³ Correspondance nr.22018, 22019 and 22020

⁴⁴ Correspondance nr.22037

⁴⁵ In: Portefeuille de Buonaparte pris à Charleroi le 18 Juin 1815 p.40

⁴⁶ Lecestre, L. (ed.) - Lettres inédites de Napoléon nr.1224

⁴⁷ Regnault, J. – La campagne de 1815 p.298
He took the document from the SHAT (files of Davout).

⁴⁸ Mémoires pour servir etc. p.60

⁴⁹ Clausewitz, Von – Hinterlassene Werke etc. p.39

⁵⁰ In: La critique de la campagne de 1815 p.11, 17-19

⁵¹ Lenient, E. – La solution des énigmes de Waterloo p.125-127

⁵² Lenient, E. – La solution des énigmes de Waterloo p.125-132

⁵³ Lenient, E. – La solution des énigmes de Waterloo p.127-130

⁵⁴ Cf. the preambles relating to the allied armies.
The distance between Sombreffe and Braine le Comte is about 33 kilometers.

⁵⁵ For the end of May, Carnot mentions a total strength of the army of the line of 375.000. For the 10th of June he establishes a total of 150.000 national guards having reached their destinations. Cf. “Exposé de la situation de l’empire” dated 13th June 1815. In: Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 p.418

Active army:

Houssaye: 291.249 men (June)

Napoleon: 217.400 men (1st of June)

Charras 180.908 men (10th of June)

Von Plotho: 212.860 men (May)

Clausewitz: 217.000 men

Regnault: 185.000 men.

Charras' figures are significantly lower as he does not include the forces which are included by Houssaye, like those which were *en route*, those in the depots, in hospitals and those at Elba and the colonies (leaving these out one comes for Houssaye on 176.566 men)

Regnault comes for the 10th of June on 284.000 men, of which 172.000 were available for the active army and the observations-corps. Some groups, however, were not available like those in Elba and the colonies (4700 men), those in the hospitals (8162 men), those of the artillery and engineers in the places fortes (11.233 men) and those in the depots (65.118 men), totalling 89.213 men. This leaves about 195.000 men, of which about 14.000 were *en route* on the 10th of June between the depots and the regiments. It can be assumed, according to Regnault, that of these about 4000 to 5000 men had reached their units by the 14th of June. In this way, he comes to a total of about 185.000 men.

Charras includes the Armée du Nord (128.088 men - Houssaye: 124.139 men) and 52.820 men of the other corps and armies, but in the strengths of these there are major differences with Houssaye (cf.table below)

Auxiliary army:

Houssaye gives 222.266 men (June) and Charras 210.000 men (15th June), while Napoleon gives 196.000 men (1st June)

Differences between Houssaye and Charras are not very significant. Within these numbers those for the national guard given are 150.000 men (Charras), 135.000 men (Houssaye) and 112.000 men (Napoleon).

Part of the auxiliary army was in the field and part in the *places fortes*. Of these, parts of the national guard were assigned to the observation corps.

According to Napoleon, the auxiliary army contained 200 battalions of national guards of 560 men each (112.000), 20 regiments of navy / sailors (30.000), 10 battalions navy artillery (8000), gardes-côtes (6000), veterans (10.000) and *militaires en retraite et réformés*, in the places fortes (30.000).

Table of the armies / corps (except for the Armée du Nord):

Opposite the High Rhine:

Lecourbe:

Houssaye: 8420 men (15th June)

St.Chamant: 8000 men

Charras: 4446 men (10th June)

Mémoires: 5392 men (1st June)

Rapp (Elzas)

Houssaye: 19.992 men (20th June)
St.Chamant: 17.244 men (13th June)
Charras: 19.031 men
Mémoires: 20.564 men (1st June)

Opposite Italy:

Brune (Var):

Houssaye: 5944 men (20th June)
Charras: 4081 men (20th June)
Mémoires: 6116 men (1st June)
St.Chamant: 6000 men (4th June)

Suchet (Alps)

Mémoires: 15.764 men (1st June)
Houssaye: 23.617 men (15th June)
Charras: 8814 men (10th June)
St.Chamant: 26.098 men

Opposite Spain:

Decaen (eastern Pyrenees):

Houssaye: 7633 men (1st June)
Charras: 3945 men (1st June)
Mémoires: 3516 men (1st June)

Clausel (western Pyrenees):

Houssaye: 6820 men (10th June)
Charras: 3933 men (1st June)
Mémoires: 3516 men (1st June)

In the Vendée:

Lamarque:

Houssaye: 10.000 men (1st June)
Charras: 8570 men (20th June)
Mémoires: 24.520 men (1st June)

For all these strenghts, cf.

Houssaye, H. - 1815.Waterloo p.33-35

Charras, J.B.A. - Histoire de la campagne de 1815 p.46-48

Mémoires pour servir etc. p.323, 327-330

St.Chamant, C. de – Les dernières armées p.256, 269, 301

Regnault, J. - La campagne de 1815; mobilisation et concentration p.129

Ploto, C. von - Der Krieg des Verbundeten Europa gegen Frankreich im Jahre 1815 p.11
Clausewitz, Von - Hinterlassene Werke p.6

⁵⁶ Report of Davout, bearing no date (most probably 25th or 26th of March). In: Houssaye, H. – 1815. Waterloo p.2-3

⁵⁷ Regnault defines this total of 284 battalions as:

251 battalions (144.000 men) resulting from the imperial decrees from before the 1st of May. Of these 251, 189 were battalions (112.000 men) in the places fortes and 62 battalions (32.000 men) in the reserve divisions.

The remaining 33 battalions (24.000 men) being supplementary battalions which were the result of the decrees of the 10th of May (these were supposed to produce 92 battalions). In: La campagne de 1815 p.122-126

Carnot mentions 417 battalions, totalling a little more as 300.0000 men. Cf. “Exposé de la situation de l’empire” dated 13th June 1815. In: Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 p.421

⁵⁸ By late April Napoleon suggested to have a force of about 80.000 men, forming the Armé du Nord. By the time Napoleon lost about 10.000 men from the Armée du Nord for the Vendée, in the second half of May, this figure was balanced by the 4th corps. By that time, it may have counted at least 10.000 men as well.

⁵⁹ Regnault claims that Napoleon originally expected to have 150.000 men in the armée du Nord by the time he needed it for the invasion in the Netherlands, mid June. For this figure he bases himself upon the strengths as Napoleon had set them for the units in his order dated 29th of March (Correspondance nr.21741).

This calculation, however, is theoretical as Napoleon knew all too well that it were just these strengths which were almost impossible to reach in time. Additionally, Regnault’s reasoning doesn’t take the time-frame of the allied invasion and its effect upon Napoleon’s plans in the north into account. In: La campagne de 1815 p.190

⁶⁰ Mémoires pour servir etc. p.59

⁶¹ Mémoires pour servir etc. p.179-180

⁶² The figures mentioned have been based upon the following battles:

Austerlitz: 1 : 1.1

Jena and Dresden: 1 : 1.5

Vauchamps: 1 : 1.6

Others were remarkably higher such as:

Montmirail: 1 : 1.8

Auerstedt: 1 : 1.9

Craonne and Leipzig: 1 : 2.2

Eylau: 1 : 2.7

In: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Napoleonic_battles

⁶³ Cf. Clausewitz, Von – Hinterlassene Werke p.7

Charras, J.B.A. – Histoire de la campagne de 1815 Vol.II p.199

Vaudoncourt, G.de , Histoire des campagnes de 1814 et 1815 en France Vol p.111
Geoffroy, lieutenant - Travaux d'étude et d'état major – étude sur la concentration de l'armée française du Nord en 1815 p.48
Lenient, E. – La solution des énigmes de Waterloo p.
Lettow Vorbeck, Von – Napoleons Untergang p.229
Regnault, J.B. - La campagne de 1815 p.135-180

⁶⁴ Regnault, J.B. - La campagne de 1815 p.157, 191-192
Gérard accordingly concentrated his corps at and between Thionville, Fontoy and Metz, while his marches were masked by units of the national guard and the 3rd *division militaire*.

⁶⁵ Regnault, J.B. - La campagne de 1815 p.164-165
He calculates 13 stages of 31-32 kilometers each.
Charras calculates 20 days for a distance of 360 kilometers, i.e. 18 kilometers a day.
In: Histoire de la campagne de 1815 Vol.II p.199