

The Battle of Waterloo

The Prussians

Howard Leemon

Generalfeldmarschall Gebhard Leberecht Fürst Blücher von Wahlstadt (1742-1819)

- Blücher was a single-mindedly aggressive general, oblivious to personal danger, with a simple approach
- He was nicknamed Marschall Vorwärts ("Marshal Forward") by his soldiers
- Born in Prussia, as a teenager he fought as a hussar in the Swedish Army until he was captured by the Prussians and thereafter joined the Prussian Army
- In 1773, Blücher was forced to resign by Frederick the Great for insubordination, until Frederick died in 1786
- He fought in a number of battles against Napoleon, mostly on the losing side but his hatred of the French never waned
- In the peace treaty of 1807 Napoleon included the specific requirement that Blücher not have a senior command in the Prussian army

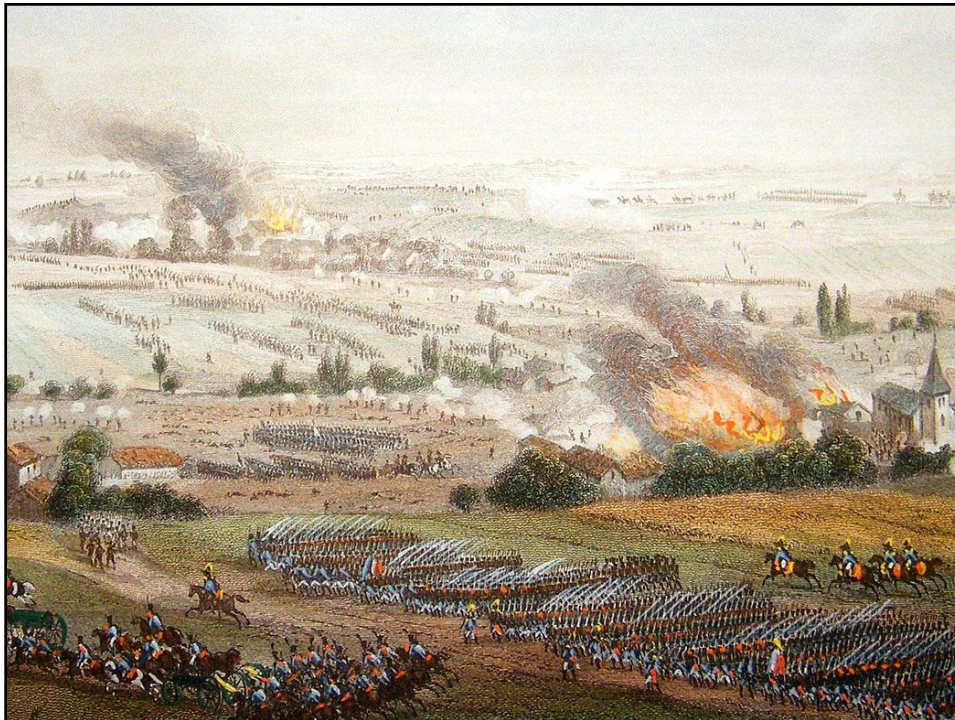
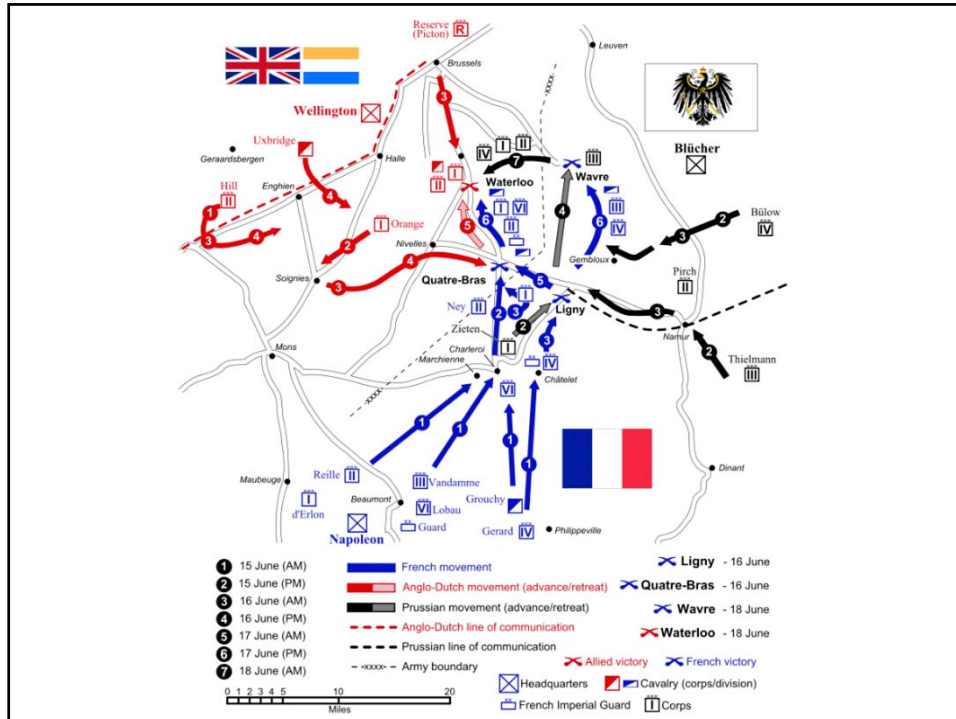


Generalfeldmarschall Gebhard Leberecht Fürst Blücher von Wahlstadt (1742-1819)

- In 1813, at the age of 70, he was back in command
- Blücher formed a strong team with his Chief of General Staff, Gneisenau; the latter contributed brains, education and caution to the partnership, whilst the former's influence was more inspirational
- He was, however, believed to be mad or, at least, suffered from occasional mental disturbances
- He became convinced that the French had bribed his servants to heat the floor of his room so that he would burn his feet, forcing him to hop around on tiptoes
- And that a French grenadier had impregnated him with an elephant
- None of this seemed to cause great concern to his fellow officers or his troops

The Hundred Days

- **18 March** Blücher was appointed Commander of the newly-christened Field Army of the Lower Rhine with four new corps
- **19 April** Blücher arrived at Liège in Belgium
- **3 May** Wellington and Blücher met and agreed to support each other if Napoleon attacked the English or Prussian armies
- They agreed to concentrate their troops between Liège and Courtrai, along the Quatre-Bras/Sombreffe line
- **16 June** 1 pm, Wellington and Blücher met at the Windmill of Bussy near Ligny where they could see the French moves and concluded that Napoleon was preparing to attack Ligny, and not Quatre-bras
- Wellington offered to send troops in support IF he was able to
- It appears that Blücher may not have understood the condition
- His dispositions show that he was expecting support from either Wellington or Bülow's IV Corps



Battle of Ligny 16 June 1815

Prussian Army under Blücher, Chief of Staff - August von Gneisenau

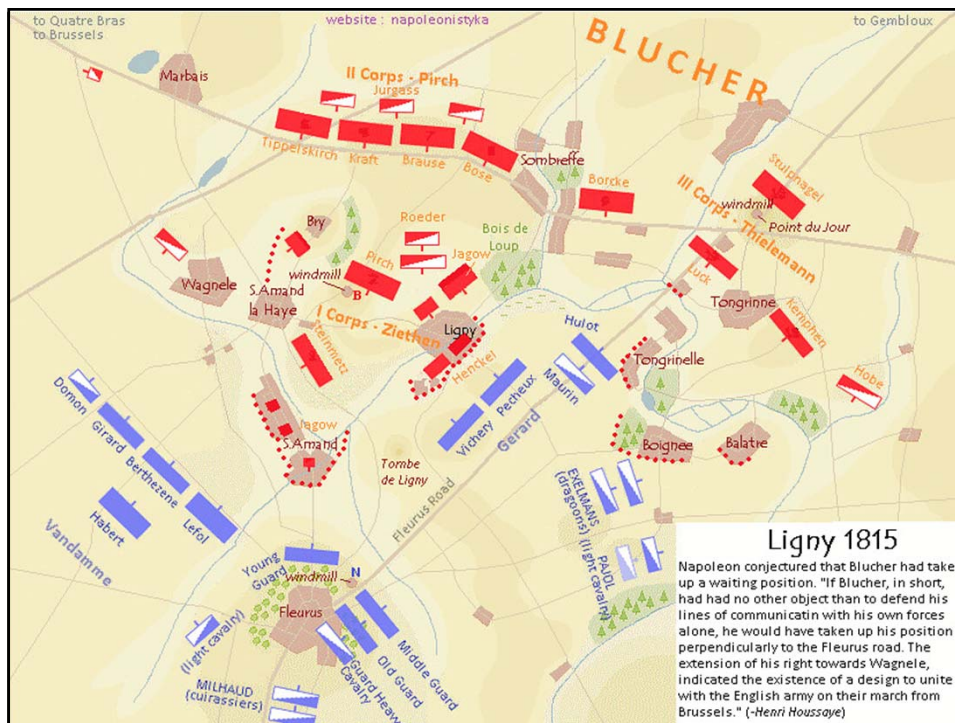
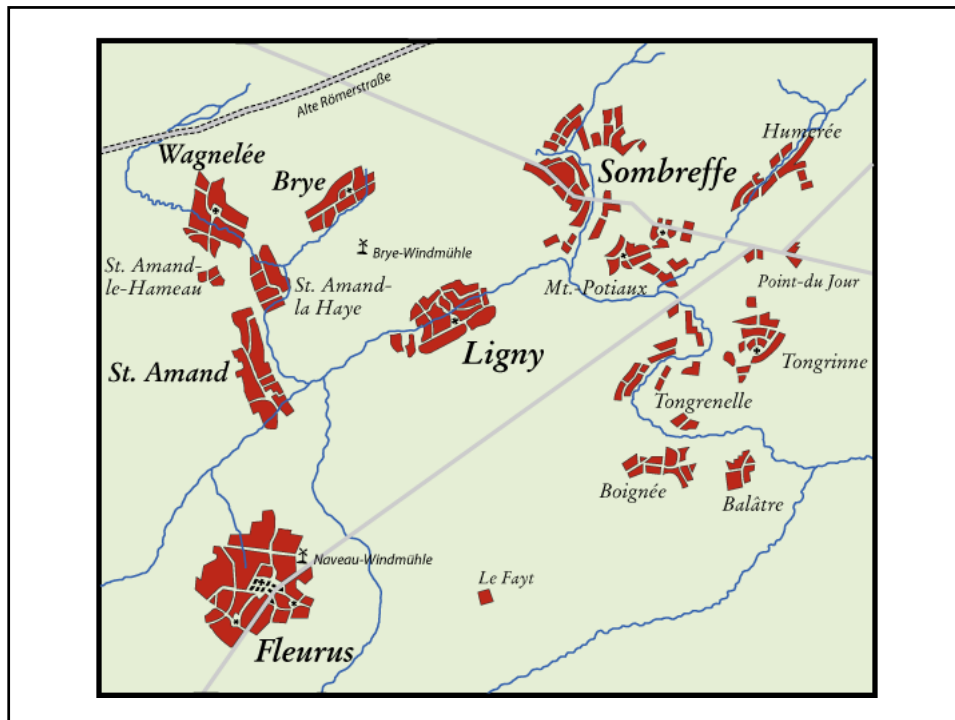
- 83,417 with 224 guns
- I Corps – Hans von Zieten
- II Corps – Georg von Pirch
- III Corps - Johann von Thielemann

French Army under Napoleon, Chief of Staff, Jean-de-Dieu Soult

- 62,882 men, with 204 guns
- Imperial guard – Antoine Drouot
- II Corps (7th Infantry Division) - Jean-Baptiste Girard
- III Corps – Dominique Vandamme
- IV Corps – Étienne Gérard
- Cavalry reserve – Emmanuel de Grouchy
- *I Corps under d'Erlons, heading to Quatre-Bras, played only a minor role by confusing both sides*
- *VI Corps under Lobau arrived very late and did not play any direct part*

Battle of Ligny (2)

- Napoleon was determined to beat the Prussians and force them eastwards, after which he would beat Wellington separately
- He was successful with his first aim but failed to separate the armies
- The French were outnumbered but he had significantly more cavalry and he had the battle-hardened and loyal Imperial Guard
- The Prussian troops had much less battle experience and some of the them were of doubtful loyalty
- The Prussians held the high ground and were ready to receive an attack, but their dispositions were faulty
- They were also fully visible to Napoleon at Fleurus who was able to direct his troops from even higher ground
- Napoleon's plan was for a frontal assault to hold the centre while he attacked the Prussian right flank, with the Imperial Guard being held in reserve to deliver the telling blow



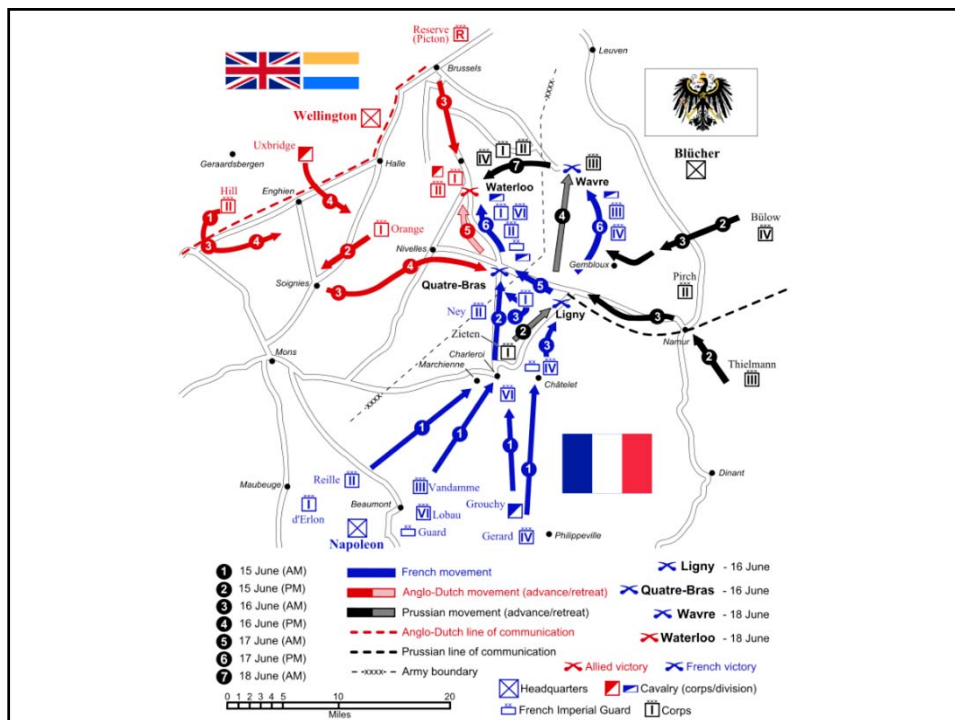
Battle of Ligny (3)

- The French moved forward 2.30 pm and the fighting was fierce with neither side gaining much advantage and various locations changing and re-changing hands
- The Prussians at the front started to run short of ammunition and resupply was becoming a problem
- Also the fighting was consuming troops and they had to feed in reserves
- When they had committed all their troops to the fighting, Napoleon observed that "They are lost: they have no Reserve"
- But he had to halt the advance of the Imperial Guard when he received reports of a column coming up behind him, which turned out to be d'Erlon's I Corps
- They were redirected to attack the Prussian right flank before being ordered to Quatre-bras by Ney



Battle of Ligny (4)

- These strange manoeuvres gave the impression of a French retreat which encouraged the Prussians but disrupted their formations
- As the evening progressed the Imperial Guard went forward to Ligny to break the Prussian centre
- By now Lobau's VI Corps had arrived to form a new reserve (which was not used) but allowed Napoleon to fully commit his existing reserve
- With the Prussians now being forced out of Ligny, Blücher led a cavalry charge to drive the French back
- His charger was shot from under him and he was trapped beneath it
- His ADC stood guard to protect him but the darkness came quickly and he was able to get 5 or 6 men to lift the dead horse and free Blücher
- The Prussians were now in retreat but kept good order and were able to fight off French attacks which finally stopped with the darkness
- Prussian losses were 12,000 KIA/WIA, the French 6,000 to 7,000
- The Prussians had been defeated but not routed



Ligny to Wavre 17 June

- During the night and early morning, the Prussians moved north east to Gembloux where they met up with Bülow's IV Corps
- Despite the severity of his injuries, Blücher doused himself in a smelly concoction involving rhubarb and brandy and drank schnapps to keep himself going
- In the morning he issued the general order: *"I shall immediately lead you against the Enemy; — we shall beat him, because it is our duty to do so."*
- He was determined to keep his pledge to Wellington and directed the army to move north to Wavre, essentially in parallel to Wellington's move
- Gneisenau did not really trust Wellington but followed Blücher's orders
- The four Corps maintained contact during the march so that any 2 could support each other quickly if required
- They also used scouts to determine the location of the French forces ahead of them and behind them

Ligny to Wavre 17 June (2)

- The French had a restful night and a relaxed morning while Napoleon toured the site of his latest victory and discussed it with his staff
- He had formed the view that the Prussians would take 2 days to recover from their defeat so there was no hurry
- On the assumption that the Prussians had gone east, Napoleon directed Grouchy to take 33,000 troops and chase after them and get between them and Wellington to prevent them combining
- *"Pursue the Prussians, complete their defeat by attacking them as soon as you come up with them, and never let them out of your sight."*
- *I am going to unite the remainder of this portion of the Army with Marshal Ney's Corps, to march against the English, and to fight them if they should hold their ground between this and the Forest of Soignies.*
- *You will communicate with me by the paved road which leads to Quatre Bras."*

Ligny to Wavre 17 June (3)

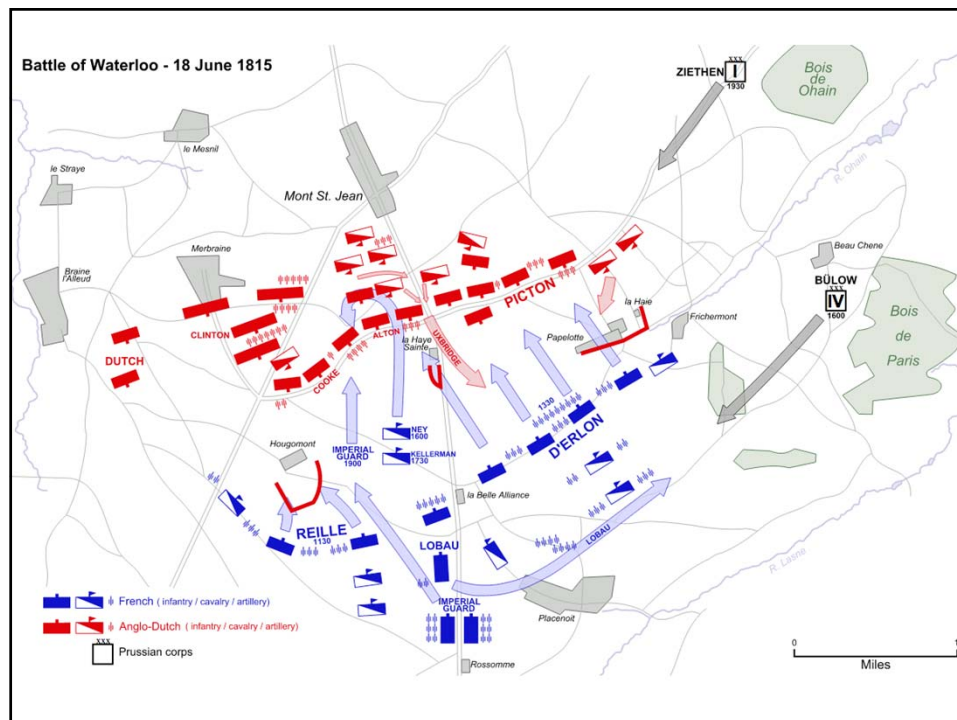
- As there had been no attempt to shadow the Prussians, Grouchy had no idea where they had gone
- Carrying out this order while not knowing where the Prussians were or where Wellington would be was going to be a challenge
- Grouchy later complained that his instructions were vague and confusing but the key errors had been made when they lost touch with the Prussians and wasted time in the morning
- With Blücher having a head start and going north rather than east, it was the Prussians who would be between Grouchy and Napoleon
- By the evening, the French army had only reached Gembloux while the bulk of the Prussian army had reached Wavre

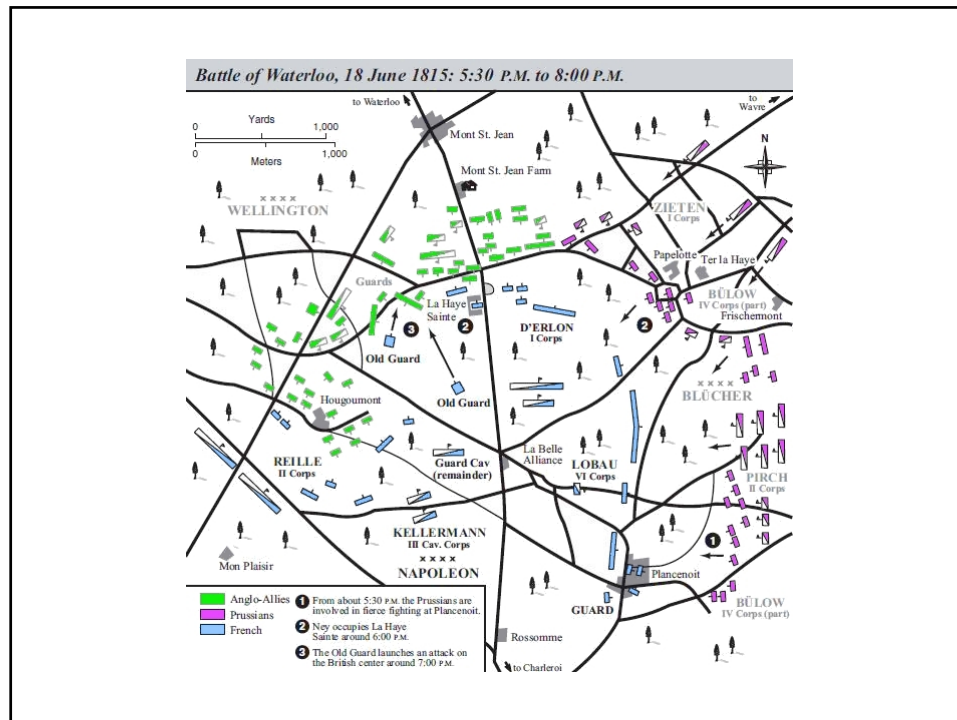
Wavre to Waterloo 18 June

- At dawn, Bülow started the march of IV Corps towards the Bois de Paris
- Blücher advised Müffling on Wellington's staff that he was on his way
- Prussian patrols already were in complete control of the area they would pass through and were able to observe the French troops
- With Grouchy nowhere to be seen, he directed Zieten's I Corps and Pirch's II Corps to follow Bülow
- The III Corps under Thielemann would form a rear guard defending Wavre until it was safe to join the army at Waterloo
- Progress was difficult but Blücher was there encouraging them on
- The bridges across the Dyle at Wavre became heavily congested
- A fire broke out in Wavre which had to be put out before the ammunition trains could be brought through the narrow streets
- Then the army had to pass through the defile of Saint-Lambert which was now a swamp after heavy rain overnight

The Prussians arrive

- Around 1 pm Napoleon observed the first of the Prussians in the distance
- He sent orders to Grouchy to come immediately but the latter ignored the first orders and the later orders arrived too late
- Blücher and Wellington had been in regular contact during the day and the Prussians were gathering in the Bois de Paris until they had sufficient strength to move out
- It was agreed that Bülow's right would be secured against Château Frischermont while the left would be ready to move against Plancenoit with Pirch supporting the middle
- Zieten arrived on a more northerly line before moving to support Bülow as ordered by Blücher when he was intercepted by Muffling who warned him that "The battle is lost if the corps does not keep on the move and immediately support the English army"
- Zieten moved directly to support Wellington's left flank





End of Part I