Annex: Military Operations on Riga

Let’s look quickly at the military operations that took place around Riga, because they had an influence on the operations on Polotsk in October.

In Riga, the situation has not changed since the start of the campaign. The port city located at the Dwina estuary, about 250 miles from Polotsk, was since the beginning of hostilities, the objective of Marshal Macdonald. He commanded the X Corps, with two divisions, composed of Prussians, Poles, Bavarians, and Westphalians. On the Russian side, it was General Essen who was given the task of holding Riga, with the help of the English Navy. His forces were essentially composed by the 22nd infantry division Lewis (or Löwis).

Macdonald’s two divisions had two distinct objectives: for the Prussians of Yorck, it was to take Riga, and if necessary to organize a siege to do so; for the 7th division Grandjean, the mission was to occupy various strategic points along the Dwina, as Jakobstadt and Dünaburg for example. Between mid-July and the end of August, several clashes took place on the front of Riga, without real winner, except that Essen had to return under the protection of the ramparts. A siege began then.

On September 26th, the garrison of Riga saw the arrival of the greater part of the Finnish Corps under the command of general Steinheil. This Finnish Corps consisted of three infantry divisions, the 6th, the 21st and the 25th, with a cavalry brigade, the 27th. Free from looking after the border with Bernadotte’s Sweden, Steinheil arrived with the 6th, the 21st infantry divisions and the 27th cavalry brigade.

In order to comply with the Czar’s orders, Essen resumed the offensive with part of his forces (about 16,000 men). A series of new clashes took place then, between Russians and Prussians, almost every time to the advantage of the Prussians. And on October 1st, Essen and Steinheil preferred to return in Riga. These clashes, which lasted four to five days, cost to the Russians 1,500 killed and wounded as well as 2,500 prisoners. The Prussians deplored 900 killed and wounded, and 350 prisoners.

Macdonald decided to take advantage of these Prussian victories to try a new assault on Riga. For this reason, he called back to him the division Grandjean, hitherto confined along the Dwina and mainly at Dünaburg. Grandjean left only a mere garrison in this town.

The Russians knowing that they were safe behind the ramparts of Riga, it was decided that Steinheil would join Wittgenstein with about 10,000 men. This movement seemed, for the two Russian generals, better correspond to the Czar’s orders. Steinheil therefore left Riga on October 6th and, on 15th, he made connection with the Bedriagua detachment (four squadrons of hussars) at Pridouisk, which belonged to Wittgenstein’s forces.
The Russian after the arrival of the reinforcements

In order to comply with the instructions of September 19th, Wittgenstein searched for possible points of passage on the Dwina, to threaten the forces of Gouvion St Cyr on the south bank.

Two places were determined for the crossing, one on each side of Polotsk. Without pontoon unit, the passage of the river will prove complicated. The Russian general assembled the equipment for the construction of a bridge and sent it with his engineers near the town of Disna, under the protection of a detachment commanding by Major Bellingshausen (1st and 2nd converged infantry regiments Infantrymen & half horse battery #23: 1,868 men and 6 guns). A second crossing point was planned, the most important for the achievement of the Czar’s plan, upstream of Polotsk, at Gourianouï: by this point, Wittgenstein hoped to cut the line of communication of the II Corps with the Grand Armée. However, the rains had inflated the river and the crossing will be revealed impossible at this place.

From Nevel, reached on October 10th, general Beguiczev, commanding the left reinforcing column, was ordered to send a detachment to Gorodok and then to Kosianouï, under the command of general Alexseiev (1st Marine regiment, a cohort of opolochenia from St. Petersburg, the Mittau dragoon regiment as well as half of the light battery #45: 3,320 men and 6 guns). From there, this detachment had to go to Gorianouï, where the Obol flows in the Dwina, to find a suitable ford. Alexseiev then had to defend this ford, and at the same time, he had to cover the march of Beguiczev on his left flank.

This general Beguiczev, at the head of the depot battalion of Polotsk regiment, the light battery #35 and five opolochenia cohorts of St. Petersburg (a total of 5,500 men and 12 guns), left Nevel to join Krasnopole. He arrived there on October 11th and joined the detachment of general Diebitsch, that Wittgenstein had sent from Siwochno to await Diebitsch and serve as his vanguard. Diebitsch's forces included the converged grenadiers battalions of the 5th and 14th divisions, the converged jägers, four squadrons from Riga, Iamburg and Ingermannland dragoons regiments, a hundred cossacks, half of the light battery #45 and 8 guns from the horse battery #23: total 2,800 men including 600 cavalrymen and 14 guns.

As we have seen, Colonel Bedriagua was sent to Pridouisk with his regiment of converged hussars to make contact with Steinheil and serve him as a vanguard.

It was also on October 10th that the column of reinforcements of the right, which had joined Wittgenstein at Sebej, reached Siwochina. The six cohorts of opolochenia that composed it, were dispersed in the regiments of musketeers of the 14th division and
regiments of jägers of the 5th. On the tactical point, it was decided that these militians would remain in second line behind the two experienced battalions of each regiment. Their part was to charge the enemy in column attack, after adequate preparation by the fire of the two regular battalions. On October 14th, Diebitsch advanced to Lipova while Beguiczev remained in Krasnopole.

On October 15th, Wittgenstein reorganized all his available forces in three columns (not including the Alexseiev, Bellingshausen and Bedriagua detachments): all in all, 26,000 infantrymen, 3,300 cavalrymen and 144 guns served by 2,200 artillerymen (annex 7). Each column had to march against Polotsk by a different road.

The left column, under the command of Beguiczev, had 9,100 men (a vanguard of 2,800 men under Diebitsch & a main force of 6,300 men under Beguiczev himself). This column took the road from Nevel to Polotsk. On October 16th, Beguiczev was at Dretoun and Diebitsch at Miczoulitchi.

The central column was under the orders of Wittgenstein himself and consisted of 11,300 men: a main force under Berg (4,500 men), a vanguard under Balk (3,200 men) and a reserve under Kakhoffski (3,600 men). Settled near Siwochina, this column moved towards Joureutchi. On October 16th, Balk was at Jartzi,

Comte Hans von Diebitsch (1785 - 1831)
(G. Dawe, Military Gallery of the Winter Palace)
He was of German origin, born in the Lower Silesia. After studying at the Cadet School in Berlin, he followed his father to the Russian service in 1801. He himself served in the Russian Imperial Army as an ensign in the Semenovski Guard Regiment and fought at Austerlitz, where he is wounded; Then he was at Eylau and Friedland the following year. He is promoted to captain after Friedland.

In 1812, he served as the Chief-Quartermaster of the 1st corps of Wittgenstein. He fought valiantly during the second Battle of Polotsk and was promoted Major-General. Assigned then against the Prussian contingent of Yorck, he took an active part in the Tauroggen convention. He served during the campaign of 1813 with General Yorck, will fight at Lutzen, then at Dresden and Leipzig. He was then promoted to Lieutenant-General. He also participated in the campaign of France in 1814.

He served very brilliantly in the Russo-Turkish war of 1828-29 which earned him the rank of Feldmaréchal. In November 1830, he commanded the army which was intended to suppress the uprising in Poland but died of cholera in 1831.

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Wittgenstein and the reserve, at Arteikovczi.

These two columns were ordered to meet at Jourevichi and formed the main corps under the command of Wittgenstein.

The third column, that on the right, was under the command of Prince Jachwill. It had to advance by the road from Sebej to Polotsk. His function was to distract a part of the French forces, and to prevent them
Map 10: Positions of the forces on October 16th
from turning against Wittgenstein. The main Corps of Jachwill’s column was under the command of Sazonov (7,300 men), while Vlastov commanded the vanguard (4,000 men). On October 16th, Sazonov was in Siwochina and Vlastov in Bieloe.

That same day, the 16th of October, Steinheil, who made his junction with Bedriaga the day before, crossed the Dwina at Drouia and advanced towards Milacheva.

Also on the same day, general Alexseiev met a French detachment at Kozianoui. According to the Russians, the enemy was strong of 2,000 infantrymen and 1,500 cavalrymen. In reality, there were about 1,100 men all in all: about 800 infantrymen (a battalion of the 3rd Swiss regiment, a detachment of 200 men from the 123rd ‘Dutch’ line regiment, and some infantrymen of the 8th division Maison); the 3rd Chevau-légers regiment with about 150 to 200 men and 100 men of the 4th Cuirassiers. As we have seen, it was Berckheim who commanded this force, but on October 15th, general Maison were present for an inspection. The reason of this inspection was, that, two days before, the French post of Sirotino was scattered by a strong scouting force from Alexseiev, coming from Kozianoui.

Alexseiev (with 3,300 men) easily repulsed the French (with 1,100 men), who retreated to Ravno. They were then reinforced by the entire 4th Cuirassiers (less than 200 men in addition). This did not prevent them from continuing to withdraw and they arrived on the evening of the 16th, in Borovoe, always pursued by Alexseiev. But the strong performance of the Swiss infantrymen enabled the whole force to retreat without being battered. The Russians abandoned the pursuit at noon. However, according to a source (general Bezegher, archives of the city hall of Lille), the Swiss battalion could not join Polotsk for the fighting of October 18th because it was forced to pass on the left bank of the Dwina because of the Russian cavalry.

As Lorencez notes in a letter to Oudinot on October 17th, “by settling on the Obol, the enemy removes a country from which we draw all our resources, especially for fodder; If he keeps it on, we are compelled to make cross the Dwina to all our cavalry and throw it on our wings”. In the same letter, it was noted that on October 17th, a force of 1,800 Bavarians was sent to Sosnitsa by Gouvion St. Cyr.
Always on October 17th, the Russians continued to advance towards Polotsk. At Jourevichi, at noon, the vanguard of Balk contacted a French force which the Russian general estimated to be about 4,000 men. According to the French sources, there was here one battalion of the 26th light infantry regiment and the cavalry Brigade Castex, all in all 1,000 men. This little force resisted against the 3,200 men of Balk until Diebitsch arrived. The French then retreated across the Polota, but in the hurry, they failed to burn the bridge. The two converged Russian vanguards (Balk and Diebitsch) pursued them for about 3 miles.

On the afternoon of that day, the main Russian force was at Jourevichi. Wittgenstein installed his staff there and reorganized again his forces: In particular, seven cohorts of opolochenia were absorbed by the four musketeers’ regiments of the 5th division and by the three converged depot battalions of grenadiers.

The first intention of Wittgenstein was apparently to make a demonstration against the French right wing between the Dwina and the Polota, while he would direct his main attack on the left wing by forcing the Polota line, practically on the same location as during the battle of August 17th and 18th. Let us not forget that the attack on Polotsk by the north bank should be, in the Russian plan, only a diversion by fixing the enemy, while other troops would pass the Dwina east of the city and force then St Cyr to abandon Polotsk and to retire to the south-west, where he would meet Steinheil, with Wittgenstein on his rear.

The mission of Steinheil, was then to advance on this left bank to surprise the French when they were forced to leave Polotsk under the pressure of Wittgenstein’s troops.

On the 17th, Steinheil attacked the position of Disna held by the Bavarians of Ströhl (about 600 men) who could retreat to Bononia. During this movement, the Bavarians resisted to Steinheil all the night without running away, despite their numerical inferiority. But when they reached Bononia on October 18th, they had lost

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**Letter from Lorencez to Oudinot, October 17, 1812**

“The Bavarians who appeared to be 4,500, who eat 9,000 rations a day, will not put 3,000 men in line; More than this, this debris no longer wants to bite; They are satisfied of having figured fairly in an action, chiefs and soldiers are working together for their disorganization to have a pretext for doing nothing. The same reproach may be made against our regiments of light cavalry; All this aspires only after resting, and the greatest opponents at the beginning of the campaign are most eager to have rest. Our infantry has recovered but we still lack officers. We have only two Generals de Brigade available in the French divisions, Moreau and Grundler. The 2nd division has gained much in the hands of Maison; But it has two very bad units: The 11th light regiment is even worse than the 124th line. The 3rd Swiss regiment acts very well yesterday.”

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40 officers and 336 soldiers. It seems that Steinheil pursued them weakly, only a few miles far from Disna.

Always on the 17th of October, in face of what appeared to be a general offensive of the Russians on Polotsk, the various Franco-Bavarian posts, like that of Disna, retreated in fairly good order to Polotsk. Only forces in Struwnia remained in place. Doumerc received the order to assemble all his cuirassier division at Pitoutina, and to join general Maison, who had to go there too. From Pitoutina, Doumerc
had to go on the left bank of the Dwina by crossing the bridge held by the Bavarians at Struwnia. Only two squadrons of the 14th cuirassiers had to remain on the right bank and escort the artillery of Doumerc on Polotsk. Doumerc had orders to disperse his regiments along the road from Polotsk to Ula: the 3rd chevau-léger at Bortnik, the 4th cuirassiers at Krasno, the 7th at Roukchienitza and the other two squadrons of the 14th at Tourovka. Maison had to accompany the artillery of Doumerc to Polotsk.

Regarding the number of troops under the command of St. Cyr’s, there must have been in mid-October 22,000 men, as we have seen. But all these men will not participate in the second battle of Polotsk on the right bank of the Dwina. In addition, this figure of 22,000 men is only a hypothesis, arguably founded but impossible to confirm. Indeed, Marshal Gouvion St Cyr wrote in his memoirs (Volume III) that he had, on October 15th, “15,572 men in the II Corps and 1,823 in the VI, who actually gave for the fight 13,000 bayonets and 2,500 sabers “. In an appendix of these memoirs, we see that there were all in all 2,607 men in the VI Corps, including 784 artillerymen. So, the figures for 1,823 correspond to the Bavarian infantry only. Fabry gives the same figures for the infantry of the VI Corps.

For the II Corps, it seems, however, that in his memoirs, St Cyr minimizes the number of men. Indeed, some reinforcements, not

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**Memoir of a surgeon-major - the Valaisan battalion in Russia in 1812 (4th battalion of the 11th French Light infantry regiment)**

“On October 16th, the regiment received about 300 recruits most from the Roman States. It was M. R., the father of my first wife who commanded them and brought them to Polotsk. On the evening of the 17th, the cannon was heard at the outposts, and the Russians seized a few positions. There was no doubt of an affair for the following day. Our army was too weak to fight with advantage against the Corps of Wittgenstein, who had since received considerable reinforcements! Marshal St. Cyr therefore did not think of opposing an obstinate resistance, but only to evacuate Polotsk honorably and in good order. Yet, no one knew the intentions of the general-in-chief; The fire of Moscow was unknown, so everyone expected to fight the next day. On the morning of the 18th, the troops were called to battle. At the moment of the gun was fired from the side of the Russians, I heard M. Dufour, a cadet of Monthey, say to his battalion commander: “My commander, I must win the cross of honor today”. He was killed a few hours after, rushing at the head of his company to drive out the Russians from a redoubt they had captured. M. Bertrand, another Valaisan officer, also died in encouraging his men. Very few of the young recruits who arrived the day before escaped death; These good men, to take revenge for the jokes which the other soldiers addressed to them when the action was to begin, ran to the front of the danger with sublime intrepidity. I set up my ambulance on the road to the nearest suburb. The retreat which the strength of the Russian army and the weakness of our army seemed to make unavoidable, would doubtless take place on this point. We evacuated our position in the evening, after setting fire to our camp, and we retired with great order behind the Dwina. The Swiss brigade, which was entrusted to protect the movement, performed the mission admirably. It was not until ten o'clock in the evening, after having disputed with the enemy and the flames a part of the city, that the brigade passed in turn and the last on the bridge, which was immediately burnt.”
added by St Cyr in his count, had arrived a few days before the battle (according to H. de Schaller): 1,000 to 1,100 Swiss from the regiments’ depots arrived at Polotsk on October 12th (they were 1,500 at the beginning of their march); 300 men in reinforcement for the Valaisan battalion of the 11th light infantry, mainly from the Roman states (according to a surgeon-major of this regiment). Perhaps other regiments or battalions received other such reinforcements. If so, then we can underestimate the strength of the divisions Legrand and Maison. In any case, Annex 7 gives the estimate we made of the number of Franco-Bavarians and Russians on October 16th.

For the brigade generals of the II Corps present in June 1812, it was the hecatomb! Lorencez wrote that in the French divisions (6th and 8th), there are only two brigade generals available in October: Moreau and Grundler. Grundler was aide chief of staff of Oudinot then of Gouvion St Cyr and was appointed general de brigade on September 10th.

General Albert, already ill in August, was still ill in October; Maison commanded the 8th division; Pamplona was governor of Polotsk; Viviès commanded troops at Globukoje; Pouget, wounded twice in August, on the 11th and 18th, had been sent to Vilna, and afterwards became governor of Vitebsk at the end of August or the beginning of September; Valentin, badly wounded in August, returned to France on September 11th; Coutard was stationed in Widzouï, apparently since August 1st.
Map 11: General Map of the Surroundings of Polotsk

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