Chapter VI
The Strategic Stalemate
from End of August to mid-October 1812

“The Daily Life”

Following wounds received on August 17th, Oudinot was evacuated to Vilna and it was Gouvion St. Cyr who took command the next day and won the battle. For his victory on the 18th, he was appointed Marshal of the Empire by decree of August 27th, 1812. General Maison, will be appointed general de division on August 21st and will take the head of the 8th infantry division.

After the relatively shallow attempt to pursue the Russians and the fighting of August 23rd, where the Bavarian general Siebein was mortally wounded, St. Cyr will remain quite inactive, concentrating his two corps of army on Polotsk and its vicinity. His forces declining steadily, he will strengthen (but with delay) his positions by building some redoubts, trying to form a sort of entrenched camp in front of the walls of Polotsk. It is true that the will of the Emperor has been executed: Wittgenstein has been repulsed from the Dwina and he is unable to threaten the left flank or the rear of the Grande Armée en route to Moscow. At least, for the moment...

For his part, Wittgenstein was also forced to inaction because of the weakness of its Corps. It can be estimated that the Russian general had under his command, on the evening of August 18, barely 12,000 infantrymen, 2,200 horsemen and 1,400 artillerymen. Because of the weakness of his battalions, he will have to reorganize them. For example, on August 25th, the six depot battalions of Grenadiers were merged into three battalions (Leib and Arakseiev together, St Petersburg and Tauride, Pavlov and Ekaterinoslav).

The forces of Wittgenstein will increase quite regularly until the beginning of October: thanks to the return of the wounded, first; the arrival of men from the depot of the regiments belonging to the 1st Corps, afterwards; and also because of the arrival of some new units. On August 24th, two infantry depot battalions of the guard (about 1,000 men) will arrive at Siwochina; On the 26th, Rodianov’s Cossacks (a little less than 400 cavalrymen) came to reinforce Wittgenstein. In early October, before the arrival of the great reinforcements promised by Kutusov on September
19th, Wittgenstein could already count on about 22,000 men, 6,000 more than the evening of August 18. What will be nearly the same numbers of St Cyr at the same time.

The main Russian forces will stay in Siwochina. But Wittgenstein will send cavalry everywhere to oppose the French patrols and outposts (three squadrons of light cavalry at Velyj, for example; the converged cuirassiers at Gramoscha, etc.). And his efforts will succeed admirably in preventing the French from obtaining good supplies. In addition, the insecurity caused by these cavalry pickets will play an important role in the morale of the Franco-Bavarians.

Thus, while the Russians will have no problem of supply, the scarcity of resources and the disease were the common lot of the Gouvion St Cyr forces and will induce a constant diminution of the Franco-Bavarian forces. If St Cyr could still count on 32,000 men at the end of August, there were only a little less than 28,000 in mid-September. For example, the Swiss were 2,825 combat-capable on September 15, while another 1,200 are in hospitals and ambulances.

Then, before the second battle of Polotsk, in mid-October, the combat-capable forces of St Cyr fell to 22,000 men (about 2,000 of whom are reinforcements).

It can be seen that, on average, more than 2,000 soldiers were lost per week (nearly 300 per day), between the end of August and mid-October.

The most affected men of this dramatic situation will be the Bavarians. Indeed, according to the future general Marbot, during this period of waiting and inaction, the French, the Swiss, the Croats, the Portuguese will work tirelessly to improve their conditions: they made their quarters more salubrious, spent treasure of ingenuity to provide supplies The Bavarians, demoralized, will make no serious effort to upgrade their situation. It must be said that they were already in a state of exhaustion before the first battle of Polotsk. And the deaths of generals Deroy on August 23rd, and Siebein the next day, will not help to improve the morale of the Bavarian soldiers.

On September 27th, in a letter to Oudinot, convalescing at Wilna, General Maison wrote: “The Bavarians are no longer of this world.” Despite this, it seems that discipline was good enough, because there was only one case of desertion noted in September among the Bavarians. But perhaps it

Excerpt from a letter from Lorencez to Oudinot, September 5th:

“Marshal St. Cyr often repeats to me that he hopes given back to you shortly, your II Corps. For him, we will have to find a new, because his VI Corps is shortly, fully in the Dwina. It’s not an image; they have so much died, that they don’t bother burying them; they bowled them in the river and the river rejected them on the banks; there is about 2,000 from here to the levels of Ghamzeleva. Nothing is more deplorable than this, and what is not less sad is that it is not permissible to warn M. de Wrede of the disorder of his hospitals, without rearing up.”
was because Bavarians had no force to desert and no expectation of success of this act! It was not the case of other units present: at the end of September, some 80 soldiers waited for judgment for desertion, almost exclusively from the 128th (Hanseatic) line and the Portuguese regiments.

Gouvion St. Cyr attests that he had taken measures to allow the troops to live correctly in the field. From August 23rd, the cantonments were organized by divisions around the city.

The II Corps was granted the right bank of the Dwina to make its requisitions. The 6th division Legrand had to settle along the Polota as far as Jourevitchi, situating at about 10 miles in the north-east of Polotsk. Probably for fear of incessant enemy incursions (he would be close to the Russian cantonments), general Legrand refused to settle there and returned closer to Polotsk. The 8th division Maison settled east of Polotsk, in different villages or small castles quite far from Polotsk (Sirotino, Ravno for example). The advantage of these cantonments was that this area had not undergone the passage of numerous troops, unlike the north and north-west areas of Polotsk. The units of the 9th division Merle received also several separated cantonments: the 4th Swiss regiment was for instance assigned to guard the city of Polotsk, while the 1st and 2nd Swiss regiments had their quarters near Ghamzelovo (practically in contact with the Russians); the 3rd Swiss was in Sosnitza.

The left bank of the Dwina from Polotsk and along the Ouzacz (or Uzacz) was granted to the VI Corps. The Bavarians also had to provide garrisons to hold a line of posts along the Dwina, which required about 1,500 men.

The cavalry had to send its men in an area from the Obol river in the south, to the Polota stream in the north.

According to Gouvion St Cyr, the resources able to be requisitioned in the various cantonments would allow regular subsistence to the troops: meat, flour, fodder. Unfortunately, the state of exhaustion was such that it was too late for many units, especially the Bavarians, to take advantage of these provisions. In addition, this distribution of the supply zones between the different troops did not always go well. In particular, the cavalry quickly finding no more food in the area reserved for it, spread further north and east and in

Excerpt from a letter from a Swiss soldier of the 3rd Swiss infantry regiment, dated August 31st, 1812

“Our Swiss regiments are reduced to very little without having been often in action. The strongest would have difficulty in presenting 600 men under arms; Ours is the weakest. If our Colonel saw his regiment in this way, it would probably cause him much trouble. To tell the truth, our regiments are not in very good odor near the generals. Most of our soldiers cruised, and, eternal robbers, got caught by the Cossacks, while, on another hand, most of them desert for the enemy or for other units; In general, it is with sorrow that I must say that our Swiss regiments do not do honor ...“
areas normally assigned to the infantry of the 8th division.

Thus in a letter of September 27th addressed to Lorencez, chief of staff of the II Corps, general Maison complained of the exactions of the French cuirassiers: "I have the honor to address you here, my dear General, a letter from my commissary of wars; you will see by its contents that the cuirassiers, not satisfied with having taken out all that I had gathered with much trouble at Ravno, brandy and cattle, still in burning one of the villages of this barony, have destroyed precious resources in grains and oats which were also destined for my division. This is not the first time I have to complain about their neighborhood. General Doumerc had made me hope for the restitution of the grains taken to Laroche, by violating my storing, but I never heard of them again. I beg you to take orders from the Marshal to inform General Doumerc that he had to respect the resources of others, and thus not to abuse force to remove them."

And here is the letter of the Commissary of War Coffin, dated on 25th of September: "The barony of Ravno has suffered singularly since it was occupied by the 3rd Division of the cuirassiers; 19 oxen and cows and nearly 500 liters of brandy that were about to be shipped to you, were taken by this troop. This significant damage for your division is little compared to the loss of an entire village, where we have stored 3,000 scheffels (the legal measure of Mecklenburg-Schwérin for grain, equivalent to about 40 liters) of rye and 1,000 scheffels of oats: it was burnt because some cuirassiers, to procure a few pounds of honey, set fire to hives of bees. Despite all this disaster, Ravno still presents some resources which I propose not to let escape; I have already occupied myself with make return possible for the peasants whom the ill-treatment of the cavalry had caused to escape; I have given orders for the resumption of the manufacture of brandy; the docility with which they have been received, makes me believe that there

Letter from Gouvion-Saint-Cyr to the Duke of Bassano, October 3rd:
"The rains having severely damaged the roads and swelled the Dwina, the Cossacks can no longer pass this river almost everywhere, as they did when the waters were extremely low. [...] I shall be obliged to make the rest of the VI Corps, which is reduced to almost nothing, to pass on the left bank of the river. I have already twice changed their positions at their request, and, notwithstanding that General Wrède has chosen with me the best places in the vicinity to settle, it is now found that it is impossible to stay longer, because of the humidity ... I do not see any great inconvenience in granting them a couple of bad villages that they ask for and they see from their settlers, and where they will find shelter a little better than their barracks. Diseases continue to take away lots of them, but the general commanding officer at Gloubokoe warned me that a party took advantage of the circumstances to appear sicker than they were, and sprang to the rear, probably hoping to be able to return to Bavaria. I have written to the governor of Vilna, to beg him to make them a new medical visit, and to arrest those who pretend to be ill, and, under no pretext, to allow them to be evacuated beyond the Niemen."
is the good intention and the resources of carrying them out.”

Testimony of Gouvion St Cyr

“Only the Generals sent the detachments to the search for commodities, and had them cooked and distributed. The result of this new mode was an economy of men who remained in the army; Moreover, the service being in the hands of the most interested, zeal was put into it: in a few days the furnaces were established, the mills repaired; we were in a position to make regular distributions to the camps, and it was possible to carry on with success the complete cessation of the marauding. This was accomplished by joining the use of the most rigorous coercive means. From there, the distributions were made as regularly as might be desired, and the divisions drew from the areas which had been assigned to them, meat, flour, and fodder in sufficient quantities for their wants. Unfortunately, the troops were already reduced to such a state of exhaustion that no means of preservation could save them. In this unfortunate campaign, we acquired the experience that of all the troops which Napoleon has conducted in Russia, the French soldiers are the ones who resist the greatest fatigue and privation.”

At the beginning of September, while the Grande Armée approached from Moscow, Gouvion St. Cyr thought for a moment that Wittgenstein could undertake a withdrawal movement towards this city and the main Russian forces. The newly promoted marshal will envisage to follow the Russian general with the II Corps; The VI would had remained in Polotsk, incapable of making any movement because of the state of exhaustion of the Bavarians. This project did not happen because Wittgenstein remained in his locations.

A little later, another plan was also envisaged on the French side: it came from Napoleon himself. On September 18th, a letter from Berthier to St Cyr ordered him to gather with the X Corps Macdonald to attack Wittgenstein.

Gouvion St. Cyr adhered to this imperial wish and proposed to Marshal Macdonald that each of them should provide 12,000 men for this plan. Gouvion St. Cyr was even ready to pass under Macdonald’s orders, to give him his troops or to command the whole force, at his pleasure. Macdonald replied that he could give only a maximum of 5,000 men for the realization of this project. Gouvion St. Cyr then answered to Berthier that, in this condition, he was unable to accomplish the movement forward against Wittgenstein.

Seeing on the contrary the increasing boldness of the Russians, the marshal decided to fortify his position at Polotsk. He was going to build various redoubts and small intrenchments around Polotsk, thanks to the engineering General Dode de la Brunerie. In fact, in a period of two months, it would have been possible to realize true fortifications, but the decision came too late, and despite the good work of General Dode de la Brunerie, it was a little late to really fortify Polotsk. An example: a brick shooting platform, known as “les Tuileries” (noted in the plan 12 “briqueterie”) was built in two days, but the bricks were not even joined together!
Skirmishes’ period

Between end of August and mid-October, French and Russians will be engaged mainly in skirmishes. Regularly, the French will spread in the surrounding countryside in search of food, which will become more and more rare because already requisitioned by the Russians, or by themselves. Then the French having to move further and further from their cantonments, the Russians will take advantage of that to set up ambushes. This type of fight will greatly favor the Russians, who were at home, helped by peasants. Among these skirmishes, three deserve special attention, as they were the only major clashes between August 23rd and October 15th in this theater of operation.

On September 1st, a Russian expedition was organized on Drissa to attack the enemy detachment that the governor of Vilna had sent there. The French force had the mission of completing the destruction of the Russian entrenched camp and consisted of a small marching battalion, accompanied by a march squadron of the 7th chasseurs à cheval. Rodianov, who had just arrived on August 26th, was put at the head of the Russian detachment: his Cossacks were reinforced by two depot squadrons of the Guard (dragoons and hussars) and a squadron of Riga dragoons (about 700 men in all). On September 3rd, Rodianov’s forces swam across the Dwina and captured 53 prisoners when he reached the enemy by surprise in his march towards Drissa; and if the marching battalion succeeded in rallying Polotsk after a few days, the marching squadron was annihilated. On September 5th, Rodianov was back in his quarters. The march battalion left the men belonging to the II Corps on Polotsk, while the other soldiers continued towards Moscow.
The second notable clash will take place in the region of Kozianouï on the Obol. Since September 7th, the Russian General Staff had been warned of enemy incursions far enough east of its bases, on Gorodok and Krasnopole. Two squadrons of Riga dragoons were sent to Krasnopole and a squadron of Ingermannland’s dragoons in Gorodok but found no enemy soldiers. In fact, the French cavalry, whose cantonments were along the Obol, had led incursions into these villages more distant, to find other sources of subsistence.

Ten days later, on September 17th, a new Russian force had to go to Krasnopole: this time it was Rodianov with his regiment, accompanied by three squadrons of dragoons (one from Riga, one from Iamburg regiments and the third was probably the depot squadron of the guard). His order was therefore to go to Krasnopole, to drive out any enemy presence, then to go to Kozianouï, to attack a depot of food stored there by the French.

Indeed, on the French side, on September 12th, order had been given to the 3rd chevau-légers lanciers to go to Kozianouï, make there some provisions. This regiment had to take opportunity for knowing more about the enemy forces located in this area. 50 infantrymen from the division Maison were attached to the 300 cavalry of the 3rd chevau-légers, commanded by Colonel Lebrun, the son of the former Third Consul.

The Castex and Corbineau brigades were at that time confined in the region of Zammitcha and Sasno, with some scouts on Sitna. Doumerc was in Piroutina with a regiment of cuirassiers, another regiment was at Ravno and the last at Sosnitza.

On September 20th, Rodianov, who had left Krasnopole to go to Kozianouï with his 500 to 600 men, repulsed a detachment of the 23rd and 24th chasseurs à cheval (Castex brigade). Arrived at his objective, he saw the weakness of the French detachments that protected the stores that the French had collected at Kozianouï.

On the night of the 20th, Colonel Lebrun, aware of the skirmish between the brigade Castex and the enemy cavalry the day before, ordered his men to ride. He placed his two squadrons on both side of the Obol at Kozianouï, linked together only by the existing bridge in the village. Thirty infantrymen were assigned to guard the castle of Kozianouï.

Staff officer without combat experience, the Colonel Lebrun left his two squadrons all night in the saddle and, when the Russian cavalry attacked, the French horsemen and horses having neither eaten nor slept, could not resist against the Russians.

It was at dawn that Rodianov attacked: he sent a detachment on each of the three roads of Polotsk, Vitebsk and Gorodok, to cut off all retreat to the French. It was two squadrons of dragoons who charged the second squadron of Lebrun, which was completely knocked over. The Russians seized the Kozianouï bridge, thus separating the two French squadrons. The first squadron could
not help the second and could only flee to Ravno, joined a little later by the rest of the other squadron. More serious, the subsistences stored at Kozianouï by the French were destroyed by the Russians.

According to the march diary of the 1st Russian Corps, 133 French were made prisoners, including one colonel (it was not Colonel Lebrun). This diary admitted 19 killed and 25 wounded in the Russian ranks. Doumerc, commanding the area where this skirmish took place, sent 600 cavalrymen to Sosnitsa as soon as he learned the clash. But the Russians had already disappeared. At the same time, order was given to the 8th chevau-légers lanciers, stationed in Sasno, to carry on a scouting action on Kholomienovo, to be better informed. Doumerc finally gave orders to the 3rd chevau-légers, who had settled in Ravno after his disappointment, to take a position in Kozianouï.

At the end of September, in the face of evidence that the Russian forces were growing in this area, it was decided on the French side, to organize a small observation corps which had to keep the environs of Kozianouï, where provisions could always be found. It was General Berkheim who was appointed commander of this force (while remaining at the head of his brigade of cuirassiers). This small corps was formed by the 3rd chevau-légers, a battalion of the 3rd Swiss regiment present at Sosnitsa, and by 400 infantrymen of the 8th division, present until there at Sirotino, and placed under the command of Captain Rouch, an aide de camp of general Maison. This force, of a little less than 1,000 men, had to remain connected with brigade Corbineau settled at Sasno.

Finally, the third significant raid undertaken by the Russians began on September 29th. It was led by 200 cavalrymen from the Grodno hussars and a hundred Cossacks, who had their settlements in Sebej. This incursion took place after the construction of defensive works had just been finished in Sebej. To increase the feeling of insecurity in the enemy, the Russian made this skirmish action on the other wing of St Cyr's forces, between Polotsk and Disna. The cavalrymen swam across the Dwina and attacked enemy supply stores on the left bank of the Dwina. They had time to destroy or seize three depots before returning safely to Sebej on October 5th.

**Evolution at the beginning of October**

In early October, the 1st Russian Corps received reinforcements, divided into two columns. But the numbers were smaller than promised.
On October 7th, the first column, on the right, reached Sebej. It consisted of the Voronej infantry regiment, two Polish Uhlan squadrons, and six opolochenia cohorts of St. Petersburg: 5,322 men in all (3,775 of whom were men of the militia).

The second column, on the left, passed through Veliki-Louki and came to Nevel. The Mittau dragoons, the depot battalion of the Polotsk infantry regiment, the 1st Marine regiment, two light batteries (#45 and #55) and nine opolochenia cohorts of St. Petersburg composed it: a total of 9,025 men including 6,581 militia. The opolochenia of Novgorod, which was part of this column, will arrive later because it was not yet organized on that time.

In the instructions given by Kutuzov and received by Wittgenstein on September 19th, 28,000 men were promised for the 1st Russian Corps. He will really receive about 15,000. In these instructions, Wittgenstein had to take the town of Polotsk. The plan proposed by Kutuzov was as follows: while fixing the enemy by a frontal attack on Polotsk (an attack which was to be only a diversion), Wittgenstein had to cross the Dwina on the east of Polotsk and seize the city by forcing the enemy to retreat to the southwest. In doing so, St Cyr would be separated from the Grand Armée of Napoleon.

Meanwhile, Essen, the governor of Riga, after having been reinforced by the Russian Corps of Finland under the command of Steinheil, had to repel the X Corps Macdonald.

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Instruction of Kutuzov given to the 1st Russian Corps, on September 15th, 1812

“You will receive enclosed, the orders I have given to Generals Tchitchagof, Tormasoff, and Steingel how they must act for the purposes of the general invasion of the Russian troops in Lithuania. The operations of the 1st Corps must conform to them; These instructions will at the same time serve as a rule for your behaviour, and then, I also find necessary to prescribe you the execution of the following:

1. To reinforce the corps which you command with so much glory, will arrive at Sebje for the 25th of September (7th of October) 11,000 men from the militia of St. Petersburg.

2. In the time span of 20-24 of September (2 to 6 of October), 9,000 troops of old troops, both infantry and cavalry and artillery, coming from St. Petersburg, will gather in Veliki, both with 9,000 men of militia from Novogorod. I put all these forces at your disposal.

3. You will prepare in advance that these troops will not be short of ammunition or food; for that, you will use the store carried from Pskow to Veliki Louki, at the time when the army intended to stop in the vicinity of Vitebsk.

4. All the detachments which you have at different places, and which will no longer be necessary for the offensive operations of Count Steingel, will be gathered for the 25th of September (7th of October). You will adjust the movement so that the Corps of Veliki Louki follows the road from Nevel to Polotsk and that the militias from Petersburg arrive from Sebje to the place where your Corps is. After the junction with this Corps, you will take under your immediate command the 5th division, the best of your reserve battalions, a large part of your cavalry, and as much artillery as necessary; and you will march in person with these forces, because of the importance of their offensive, to gather with the Corps of Veliki Louki on the road to Polotsk. The place of this junction is given to your choice. The right Corps will remain under your command, and you will put Prince Jachwill in command of it.

5. The Corps of Veliki Louki, which being reinforced by the elite troops that came with you, providing a total of about 35,000 men, will pass on the left bank of the Dwina for the 1st (13th) of October. In this way, you will seize not only Polotsk, where the frontal attack would have succeeded only with great loss on our side, but you will also cut the Corps of Oudinot entirely from the French Grande Armée. Prince Jachwill will advance at the same time on Polotsk by the right bank of the Dwina. You can make the crossing of this river between the mouth of the Obolia and Polostk, trying to make believe to the enemy that you want to take the city by an attack on the right bank. The course of the Obolia on the right bank of the Dwina and that of the Oula on the left bank will cover your crossing against the obstacles you may fear from Vitebsk and the French Grande Armée.

6. After having seized Polotsk from behind, and having attracted to you the Corps of Prince Jachwill, you will continue with all your combined forces and as vigorously as possible, to pursue the troops of Oudinot, who, being cut off from the French Grande Armée, will be rejected on the Corps of Count Steingel, who must have at this time, succeeded against the Corps of Macdonald, between Vidzouï and Swentzianouï. General Steingel will continue the pursuit of Oudinot from Swentzianouï and drive him beyond the Vilia and even the Niemen. He will then seize Vilna, keep watch on the Niemen against the Prussians; He will serve at the same time as a reserve for the united Corps in the area of Minsk near the Berezina.

7. Having repulsed Oudinot in this way, and covering your march by the actions of General Steingel, you will quickly turn to Dockchitsouï, where you may be arrived for the 20th of October. From there, you will open communications on Minsk, give your hand to General Tchitchagof on Berezino, and you will become master of Lepel and of the course of the Oula from its mouth to the Berezina.

8. It will be necessary to fortify as much as possible all the pass of the Oula, because it will be impossible to foresee on which side the enemy's Grande Armée will retreat after passing the Dnieper. You will stand in natural connections with the other armies; You will be able, after having taken accurate information about the condition of the enemy at Vitebsk, to complete an expedition against that city, in order to remove all fulcrum to the French army during its retreat. You will await in this position the events that will take place at the Grande Armée and will receive in due course, the instructions according to what will happen.

9. The execution of instructions to the other detached Generals who had to contribute to the execution of our plan of campaign, is present in the introduction.
Then, part of his forces had to march against Gouvion St Cyr, and, joined at Wittgenstein, will destroy the forces of the new Marshal of Empire. After these actions, the Russian plan foresaw that the gathered forces under Wittgenstein should move towards Vilna or Berezina and join Chichagov there. Excellent plan, but which prove impossible to achieve in its entirety.

With the reinforcement of 15,000 men, Wittgenstein was certainly far from the promised 28,000, especially as a significant part consisted of militia, full of enthusiasm for the most part, but without experience of war, and poorly equipped. However, the balance of power was now in favor of the Russian.

Indeed, at the beginning of October, Gouvion St Cyr could still count on approximately 22,000 men. At that time, reinforcements included, Wittgenstein has about 38,000 men under his command. He is therefore ready to perform Kutuzov’s orders. In addition, he did not know yet that the Steinheil Corps, with 10,000 experienced soldiers, will join him sooner than expected.

On October 8th, Wittgenstein received a letter from Kutuzov urging him to execute the plan envisaged three weeks earlier. It was on this October 8th that Wittgenstein learned that Steinheil, with the Finnish Corps, had left Riga for Polotsk to reach the town in mid-October. Steinheil had left Riga on October 6th. In the night of the 9th to the 10th, he settled at about 12 miles from Kreutzburg. On October 12th, he was at about 6 miles from Dünabourg.

**Letter from Gouvion St. Cyr to the Duke of Bassano, October 3, 1812:**

“There is nothing new in the district of my command; The enemy continues to harass our flanks with its Cossacks, but it remains always very concentrated on the Drissa near Sakolitschi, where Count Wittgenstein’s headquarters are located. [...] I will make occupy Disna and keep the ford which is in its counterpart by 600 infantrymen, a little cavalry and two pieces of cannon; It is the Bavarians who will provide this post and a few small locations to observe the Dwina, from Disna to Polotsk.”

On the French-Bavarian side, despite St Cyr’s efforts to organize the supply as effectively as possible, it seems that, at the beginning of October, there was no forage in the cantonment areas reserved for the cavalry. The new marshal then decided to repatriate all the horses, from cavalry and artillery, to Polostk, and, from here, to pass them on the south bank of the Dwina, where he hoped that the forage would be more abundant.

If the II Corps was still able to fight, and the determination of the soldiers will be brilliantly verified on October 19th and 20th, the VI Corps could not even provide the equivalent of a small division in order of battle. That was why they were confined to the custody of various posts: 500 to 600 men under Colonel de la Mothe had been sent to Struwnia to keep this bridgehead (it was the rest of the 1st, 4th and 10th Bavarian regiments); 300 men (rest of the 2nd, 3rd, 6th and 7th...
regiments) and four batteries (Hofstetten, Wagner, Rois and Weishaupt), under the command of general Vincenti, held two redoubts in front of Polotsk, on the right bank of the Polota (two batteries in each); the detachment of Colonel Ströhl (5th and 11th regiments and 5th light battalion, with two guns) totaling about 500 to 600 men, was at Disna, with also an element of light cavalry; finally, the rest of the Bavarian artillery was stationed on the left bank of the Dwina, not far from Polotsk.

For the reinforcements, it seems that on September 25th, Polotsk saw the arrival of a reinforcement of 338 Bavarians. They had started their long way from Bavaria with more than 600 men ... On October 6th, a march battalion of a little more than 400 men arrived and reinforced the units of the II Corps. Finally, on October 12th, a reinforcement of 1,000 to 1,200 Swiss also arrived at the gates of Polotsk.

Gouvion St Cyr, learning that Steinheil had started to march against him and that Wittgenstein had received substantial reinforcements, turned to Macdonald and wrote him an urgent letter asking him to engage in combat against Steinheil, who would pass not far from his forces. But Macdonald did not think himself authorized to perform the maneuvers and movements necessary for this action, without the express order of Napoleon. According to the Comte de Segur, Macdonald was already suspicious about loyalty of Yorck at that moment. He will also refuse to send reinforcements to St. Cyr, despite his request. He probably could not, but his inaction will be still surprising.

St Cyr could also have hoped for the reinforcement of Marshal Victor's IX corps, which had been in Smolensk since September 27th (about 250 km from Polotsk). But at the beginning of October, Napoleon ordered Victor to send his Corps halfway between Vitebsk and Smolensk, in order to be able to provide a reserve and a consequent force on the rear of the Grande Armée.

On October 10th, this Corps numbered about 25,000 men, after the addition of two Saxon infantry regiments which had just arrived at Smolensk.

Napoleon left to Victor the liberty to operate towards Vilna or Minsk, if either of these towns was threatened, but not beyond these cities. Because of these orders, his Corps will be of no utility for Gouvion St Cyr, to keep Polotsk.

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.
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 Dünabourg 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 Gourianou: 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 Kosianou, 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 Gorianou, 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 Siwochino 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 Jourevitchi. On October 16th, Balk was at Jartzi, 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

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.
the road from Sebej to Polotsk. His function was to distract a part of the French forces, and to prevent them 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

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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 unitss: The 11th light regiment is even worse than the 124th line. The 3rd Swiss regiment acts very well yesterday.”
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 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 Piroutina, 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

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.”
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 Tourova. 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 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 Widzoui, apparently since August 1st.
Map 11: General Map of the Surroundings of Polotsk

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