Chapter VIII
Retreat from October 21st to 29th

On October 21st, von Wrede decided not to obey the orders of St Cyr and to keep with him the regiments of the II Corps he had under his command the day before. He went in person to the French General Staff to explain his decision and to try to obtain the marshal’s authorization to keep these regiments with him. But St Cyr had already left to heal his wounds and had given the command to general Legrand. The meeting between von Wrede and Legrand went wrong, the French refusing to yield to the demands of the Bavarian. An altercation ensued to the point that general Legrand decided to refuse his nomination at the head of what remained of Franco-Bavarian forces.

However, the commanders of the regiments in question made movement to return to their respective divisions, one part on the evening of the 21st, another part on the 22nd, and the rest only on October 23rd.

Von Wrede had received the initial order to stay on the Uzacz at Roudnia to observe the enemy. But if the Russians crossed the Dwina, he had to withdraw towards the II Corps and join his left wing. Before leaving, St Cyr had given orders to the II Corps too: it had to retreat and reform between Voronezh on the left and Tourovka on the right, its center on Ghomel (map 15).

On the 22nd, therefore, division Legrand was at Tourovka, leaned on the Dwina, with the brigade Castex; the division Maison was in the center at Ghomel; the Merle division was at Voronezh, west of Maison, leaning on the Uczaz; the division Doumerc was deployed between Berezovo and the banks of the Dwina, south of Legrand.

Arrived on his position, Legrand put into effect his decision to give up the interim command of the II and VI corps. It was Merle who was appointed to take the command. But categorically refusing to take in hand the destinies of the VI Corps, he commanded only the II Corps. Von Wrede, despite the allegations of fidelity and obedience given, seems to have wanted to separate from the II Corps. In any case, with his 2,000 Bavarian survivors and the brigade Corbineau, instead of marching on the left bank of the Uczaz, he decided to put this river between his forces and those of the II Corps. His will was to go to Globukoje, moving away from the II Corps. On October 23rd, Merle, unaware of von Wrede’s intentions, ordered the II Corps to move closer to
Mouvements des belligérants entre le 22 et le 28 octobre 1812

2e Corps français

Russes

W : Wittgenstein
S : Steinheil

22 : date de présence
combats

Map 15
the Bavarians and thus move away from the banks of the Dwina, with the risk of leaving the Vitebsk road free, allowing Wittgenstein to take position on the escape route of the Grande Armée. At 2:00 am, division Legrand, with the 3rd chevau-légers, left Tourovka to go to Ghomel, which was occupied by the division Maison. At the approach of Legrand, Maison had to go to Oriekhovo. The division Merle had to leave Voronezh to go to Uzacz and join Maison in Oriekhovo. The brigade Castex, which was with Legrand at Tourovka, had to go to Janovo and Berezovo, to observe the banks of the Dwina. Doumerc had to approach the Uzacz by going to Tourets (i.e. Ghorouï). In his arrangements, Merle thought to make easier for von Wrede to join him. But the Bavarian general had passed on the right bank of the Uczaz as we saw, and reached Babinischi in the afternoon of 23rd.

On October 22nd, in Russian part, Colonel Rüdiger, at the head of the Grodno hussars, the Cossacks of Rodianov and Platov, swam across the Dwina and pursued the II Corps. Alexseiev, who don’t succeed in crossing the Dwina at Gorianouï, arrived at Polotsk to join the forces of Wittgenstein. Here the Russians finished the construction of a bridge in the night of October 22nd-23rd.

The plan envisaged on mid-September could not be executed. So, Wittgenstein estimated that his first duty was to pursue the II Corps to harass it.

Leaving a strong garrison at Polotsk and a detachment for Drouïa, he crossed the Dwina on October 23rd with the rest of the forces he had with him. The same day, the vanguard under Rüdiger reconnected with the French.

At the same time, Steinheil accompanied by Sazonov crossed the Dwina at Disna and went to Babinischi and Klubitschi.

Wittgenstein preferred leave a strong garrison in Polotsk of 3,000 men (5,000 according to the operations’diary of the Russian I corps): 2 cohorts of the Opolochenia of Novgorod, the 12th cohort of Opolochenia of St. Petersburg, the Guard Infantry Depot, the squadron of Ingermannland Dragoons regiment, the Teptiarlsk Cossacks Regiment and two batteries (one of Position and one Light).

He sent Vlastov towards Drouïa to observe Macdonald: the 24th Jäger,
the 1st cohort of Opolochenia of St. Petersburg, one battalion of the 23rd Jäger with the 9th cohort of Opolochenia of St. Petersburg, the 1st & 2nd Converged Infantry regiments, the Finland Dragoons regiment, the Lotchiline Cossacks regiment, 8 guns from the Horse Battery #23 ans 6 guns from the Position Battery #28: 5,000 men all in all.

The Polotsk garrison was 5,000 strong, according to the diary of the 1st Russian Corps, but closer to 3,000 in reality: Novgorod’s opolochnenia (2 cohorts); 12th cohort of opolochenia of St. Petersburg; guard infantry regiment (2 battalions); the Cossacks of Tiptiarsk; the depot squadron of Ingermannland Dragoon; two batteries (a position and a light batteries).

It was Vlastov who was sent to Drouïa to observe Macdonald. He had under his command the 24th Jäger, the 1st and 9th cohorts of opolochenia of St. Petersburg, a battalion of the 23rd Jäger, the 1st and 2nd converged infantry regiments, the Finnish dragoons, the Cossacks of Lotchiline, 8 guns of horse battery #23 and 6 from the position battery #28: 5,000 men in all.

On October 24th, a clash took place in Oriekhovo between Rüdiger and the French who had just arrived there. The proximity of the Russians encouraged Merle to continue the retreat after destroying the Oriekhovo bridge on the Uzacz to delay the enemy. In doing that, he prohibited any possibility of meeting with von Wrede, who had retired himself to the other side of the river. But this one, as we have seen, did not intend to follow the orders that obliged him to join Merle and the II Corps. Merle decided to give each division different retreat routes, so that she could find enough food. His own division, accompanied by the Cuirassiers brigade Berckheim, left Uzacz at 5:30 pm and went towards Sverbiachin, 6 miles northwest of Kamen. His target was Lepel. Division Legrand took a road parallel to that of Merle. He had to go to Kamen, then from there, to Czarnicki. Maison, with the rest of the Cuirassiers had to go to Zabolotsch by the road of Zarouï. His objective was Lepel where he would meet at Merle.

On the evening of the 24th, Wittgenstein reached Uzacz. He will stay at Uzacz all day on the 25th, but his vanguard will continue to closely follow the French. This vanguard was increased with infantry and Wittgenstein gave the whole force in the hand of general Alexseiev. This general reached Woron as Maison reached Zabolotsch.

Still on October 24th, Steinheil with his main force, caught up with von Wrede, who had remained imprudently at Babinisch. The Russian attacked around 8 am, pushed the Bavarians away easily, and pursued them on the road to Klubischi. At the same time, the vanguard of Steinheil, commanded by Helfreich, reached the baggage of the Bavarians whom von Wrede had sent towards Uzacz and II Corps. The
Russians seized the battery of 12 Weishaupt who accompanied the convoy, as well as 22 flags of the Bavarian regiments.

On October 25th, while Steinheil remained at Klubischi, a cavalry detachment pursued the Bavarians and reached them 8 miles away on the road to Pouichna. The Russians made a hundred prisoners but von Wrede managed to reach Pouichna. Here, he received a missive from Gouvion St Cyr ordering him to join the II Corps at Zabolotsch, about 5-6 miles from his position, and to put himself and the brigade Corbineau under Merle’s orders. Von Wrede does not obey again. On the morning of the 26th, he went to Dogitschi with Corbineau, whom he had not informed of the order received by St Cyr, and gave the marshal the justification of defending Vilna.

Finally, on October 26th, under pressure from the Russians, it was decided that only Maison should continue on its way to join Lepel, while Legrand and Merle would stop just behind Kamen.

Because of the poor state of the roads and because he had enough artillery, Wittgenstein left in Uzacz three batteries (position #27 and light# 35 and #57). He added an infantry detachment under Harp, to protect and escort these batteries to Polotsk. For him, after a day of resting in Uzacz, he took the road to Zaraoui in the

General Pierre-Hugues-Victor Merle (1766-1830)

(portrait from Ulbachs, P.J.H., en I.M.H. Evers, Tweeduizend jaar Maastricht ; Zutphen, 2006, p.173)

He was enrolled in 1781 but had not the prescribed age. He joined the army again in 1784. He became second Lieutenant in 1792.

General de brigade on April 14th, 1794, he commanded an infantry brigade in the Army of the Eastern Pyrenees, under General Moncey. He went to the Army of the Coasts-of-Ocean in 1796 in the division Chabot. In 1798, he was arrested for refusing to shoot Vendeans prisoners. Acquitted, he passed to the Army of Italy in 1800 and then to the camp of Saint Omer in 1803. In the division Legrand on August 30th, 1805, he served at Austerlitz and was appointed General de division on December 24th, 1805. He passed in Spain in 1808, under Bessières, seized Valladolid on 12th of June, served at Medina de Rioseco on July 14th. He fought under Marshal Soult at La Coruña on 16th of January 1809, and at Oporto, where he was wounded on March 29th. He passed to Portugal and was seriously wounded in Buçaco with a shot of grape shot on the arm on September 27th, 1810. He served at Fuentes de Oñoro on May 5th, 1811. Then, he passed to Germany on May 18th, 1812 and took command of the division formed of the Swiss and Croats under Oudinot. He served especially in the 2nd Battle of Polotsk. He took command provisionally of the 2nd Corps from October 23rd to November 4th. In 1813, he commanded the 25th Military division at Maestricht. He served under the Duke of Angoulême in the South, in May 1815 and was admitted to the retreat in August 1816.
footsteps of his vanguard. This vanguard joined the division Maison in Zabolotsch but could not rush it. However, Colonel Lebrun, chief of the 3rd chevau-légers was killed on this occasion.

That same day, Vlastov arrived at Drouia, while Steinheil was between Klubuschi and Pouichna.

On October 27th, Maison and Doumerc left Zabolotsch, crossed the Oula near Lepel, and advanced towards Czarnicki. Legrand and Merle left Kamen and also went towards the river Oula, Merle in the direction of Czarnicki, Legrand further upstream towards Botscheroisko.

Wittgenstein, who had reached Zarouï the day before, stayed there all day long, waiting for the baggage and supplies which had difficulty to follow.

Steinheil, meanwhile, reached Pouichna that von Wrede had left the day before. The Bavarian general, as we have seen, had decided not to join the II Corps but to go to Vilna. He reached Dogitschi on October 27th. In the evening, he learned that Viviës, governor of Globukoje, had just left the city at 4 pm, due to the risk of the arrival of the Russians.

On October 28th, Legrand was at Botscheroisko, Merle at Czarnicki, and Maison at Gorodenets. Wittgenstein still stayed in Zarouï where he waited for Steinheil to join him the next day. From this village, Wittgenstein sent Stolypin to Kozianou with two squadrons of the Iamburg dragoon regiment and some Cossacks, because of the marauders still present in this area still abundant in supply. Wittgenstein called Steinheil because he was worried (with reason) about the proximity of Victor’s IX Corps.

On October 29th, Steinheil joined Wittgenstein and both went towards Lepel. The Russian general-in-chief sent Jachwill, who commanded the new Russian vanguard, a little farther forward, towards Czarnicki, by Gorodenets. He wanted to take contact with the French, a contact lost by his slowness in pursuing them.

General Harpe, after having brought the three batteries back to Polotsk, will join the main force of Wittgenstein. That day, the French remained on their positions.

According to the diary of the 1st Russian Corps, from October 23rd to 31st, the Russians took 8 cannons, 4,000 prisoners (including 80 officers), part of the baggage of the II Corps and all those of the VI (with the 22 flags).

In a letter dated October 30th, von Wrede wrote he had only barely 4,000 men (including the brigade Corbineau with 700 to 800 men); and this, despite having incorporated various detachments from Globukoje (including 200 Bavarians). On November 1st, he entered Globukoje and was no longer threatened until November 23rd, because Steinheil had joined Wittgenstein. Von Wrede will remain in Globukoje until that date.

Marshal Victor, in a letter to Marshal Berthier dated November 2nd, gave the forces of the II Corps on October 29th: the 6th division Legrand had still 4,000 men; the 8th Maison had “3,000 and some men”; the 9th division
Merle, a force equivalent to the 8th. Victor estimated the strength of the Castex brigade at 400 horses and 1,400 for the division Doumerc. Corbineau is not counted because he was still with von Wrede. Thus, Merle had 12 to 13,000 men, artillery included. Victor also gave the location of these forces on that date: Legrand and Castex were at Botscherkovo; Maison in Gorodenets; Merle at Czarnicki; Doumerc to Tsapin (or Tyapino).

Thanks to the numerous testimonies collected and to the Swiss federal archives, we can roughly find the forces of the four Swiss regiments during this period. When they left Polotsk, the Swiss were less than 2,000 men. Very quickly, a battalion of the 4th Swiss, with 220 men, was sent to Vilna to guard a convoy of 1,400 prisoners and the regiment was reduced to about 250 men. On October 29th, the Swiss were still 1,300: 400 to 450 in the 3rd regiment, 250 in the 4th and thus a total of 600 to 650 for the other two regiments (1st and 2nd Swiss). On the eve of the battle of Berezina, the Swiss will still be 600 men, of which only a hundred in the 4th regiment.

Map 16: Aera of the operations of Wittgenstein and the II and IX French Corps, between October 28th and November 28th