Chapter IX
Interception of the IX Corps
October 30th to November 26th

Before Clash of Czarnicki

Since September 27th, the IX Corps under Marshal Victor’s command was staying at Smolensk. At the beginning of October, Napoleon ordered Victor to go halfway between Vitebsk and Smolensk, to form an ultimate reserve for the Grande Armée. However, the Emperor left him the task of judging if he thought necessary to reinforce Reynier or St Cyr.

Following these imperial orders, on October 11th, Victor ordered the 26th infantry division Daendels, accompanied by Saxon chevau-légers Prinz Johann to go to Babinovichi. The next day, the 12th division Partouneaux, with the Baden hussars,
left Smolensk for Mstislav, while the 28th division Girard and the rest of the light cavalry commanded by Fournier-Sarlovèze remained at Smolensk (map 17).

According to a letter from Victor to Berthier on the 10th of October, the 12th division had at that moment 9,000 men in its ranks; the 26th, 6,000 and the 28th (including the two Saxon infantry regiments which had just arrived), 5,400 men; the light cavalry had 1,400 horses. Initially, 2,400 men (4th Westphalian line and provisional regiment of Hesse-Darmstadt light infantry) en route to Vilna, were to join the IX Corps and form the 3rd brigade of the 28th division. But at the end of October, they were ordered to stay in Vilna and wait to join the division Loison, organized at Danzig.

On October 20th, Victor learned the Wittgenstein’s offensive against Polotsk. He then decided to join the forces of Gouvion St Cyr. Daendels was ordered to leave Babinovichi to go to Vitebsk. Partouneaux had to leave Mstislav to join Orcha, where Girard and Fournier had also order to go from Smolensk. From Orcha, this force had to join Daendels in Vitebsk. From there, Victor thought he could threaten Wittgenstein on his left flank and force him recede away from the Dwina and Polotsk.

But on October 24th, when he learned that St Cyr had abandoned Polotsk and was pursued by Wittgenstein, Victor ordered the troops assembled at Orcha to march not to Vitebsk, but to Sienno to arrive there on October 28th. He first ordered Daendels to stay on Vitebsk, but three
days later, on October 27th, the Dutch-born general hed ordered to take his division to Benzenovichi, where he arrived on the 29th around noon. He will leave at Vitebsk only one battalion of the Grand Duchy of Berg.

On its arrival at Sienno, Fournier’s cavalry had to advance towards Korolevitchi.

Thus, on the evening of October 29th, when Legrand and Castex were in Botscherkovo, Merle in Czarnicki, Maison in Gorodenets and Doumerc in Tsapin (map 18), the IX Corps Victor was able to join “the honorable remains of the II Corps” (dixit Victor).

The 26th division Daendels (and the regiment of Saxon chevau-légers Prinz Johann) occupied Benzenovitschi. The other two infantry divisions bivouacked between Sienno and Czarnicki (the 28th at less than 10 miles from Czarnicki, the 12th, 5 miles away); Fournier’s cavalry was at Korolevichi, 5 miles further.

On the Russian side, that same evening, the vanguard under Jachwill strongly urged the 8th division Maison on its positions at Gorodenets and forced it to retreat to Czarnicki where it joined the division Merle, under the protection of the cuirassiers Doumerc.

Victor, informed of this engagement on the morning of the 30th, warned the two French infantry divisions present at Czarnicki as well as the cavalry of Doumerc (about 8,000 men in all), to be ready to fight and he decided to take the command of these troops personally, thinking of having to endure a Russian attack during the day. Victor estimated the forces of the Russian vanguard at nearly 10,000 men (5,000 to 6,000 infantry, 2,000 cavalry, 1,500 Cossacks and some artillery). He was pretty close to the truth in his estimate: Jachwill had 6,700 infantrymen, 1,500 horsemen, 500 Cossacks and nearly 30 cannons.

Wittgenstein himself was still unaware of the proximity of Victor’s troops, but he nevertheless ordered
Jach will not to attack the French immediately, but to await the arrival of the main Russian forces, who arrived from Lepel. On the evening of October 30th, the Russians, gathered, settled about 2 miles from Czarnicki and the French lines.

Thus, finally, no one daring to take the initiative, Russians and French passed the day of the 30th, within the range of the gun, arms at the ready, awaiting the arrival of their mutual main force.

Victor took advantage of this day to organize all the troops at his disposal and divide them into three columns: the right wing, made up of the 6th and 26th infantry divisions and the light cavalry brigade Castex, under the command of Daendels (10,000 men); that of the center, formed by the 9th and 28th divisions under the command of Merle (8,500 men); the left wing formed by the 8th and 12th infantry divisions and the light cavalry Fournier, under the command of Partouneaux (13,000 men); finally, a reserve formed by artillery and the cuirassiers division Doumerc (1,400 cavalrymen). Orders were given for each infantry division to have 12 guns sufficiently supplied.

As we have seen, on the morning of the 30th, Victor had only the divisions Merle, Maison and Doumerc, available. The marshal ordered, during the day, to Legrand, Girard, Partouneaux and Fournier to join him as rapidly as they could.

Girard arrived at first, and deployed his division before Smoliany on the morning of the 31st; Partouneaux arrived in the afternoon; Fournier, late at night. For Legrand, we do not know exactly when he arrived, but it seems that it was in the afternoon as well. Daendels had received orders to stay in Benzenovichi.

The diary of the 1st Russian Corps wrote that the Russians estimated the forces of the IX Corps at the end of October at 40,000 men: it was almost twice the real strength of this corps. This assessment may be one of the reasons for Wittgenstein’s lack of aggressiveness in early November.

At that date, in fact, Victor counted, with the II and IX Corps, between 35 and 36,000 men, but these were scattered. In a letter he sent to Berthier on October 28th, Victor himself enumerated his forces: about 12,000 infantrymen (and artillerymen) and 2,000 cavalrymen in the II Corps; 20,000 infantrymen (and artillerymen) and 1,600 cavalrymen in the IX. Wittgenstein could oppose him about 30,000 men (27,000 infantry, including 7,000 militia, a little more than 4,000 cavalrymen and 121 guns).

The Clash of Czarnicki: October 31st
It was at 7:00 am on October 31st, that the Russians will engage the battle. Jachwill at the head of five battalions of the 2nd, 3rd and 25th Jäger took advantage of the fog to advance on Czarnicki. But the French present in this village were waiting for them and defended their position successfully. Seeing Jachwill unable to take the village, Wittgenstein ordered Steinheil to advance to the right of Jachwill, and general Berg to deploy his units in reserve behind the other two Russian generals.

At 9:00 am, the fog rose and revealed to Victor the Russian forces present in front of him and the battle plan of Wittgenstein. At that moment Jachwill, whose right flank was firmly leaning on Steinheil, renewed his attack and succeeded in taking Czarnicki in a bayonet charge. The Grodno hussars tried to prevent the French from reforming behind the village but without success. Jachwill then decided to continue his pressure, against the French right wing which leaned on the Oula, while Berg attacked a wood that French skirmishers occupied on their left. The Russian final objective was to repulse the French and force them to retire. Berg failed in a first attack, but he sent again his troops to the assault, three infantry regiments (Tenguinsk, Tula, and Estonia) directly to the wood, while on one side the converged hussars and on the other side the converged dragoons and the 26th Jäger circumvented the wood.
Risking being overwhelmed by this second attack of Berg, the French abandoned the wood and in doing so, left the French left in the air. Finally, the whole French line retreated towards the Lukomlia River and Girard’s division which was deployed behind the river.

Despite the converged dragoons who pursued the retreating units and the fire that the light battery #6 focused on the only bridge that crossed the Lukomlia at this place, the French managed to cross the river and they positioned themselves to the left of the Girard’s 28th division.

The Russian skirmishers tried for a while, to approach the bridge, but facing the enemy fire, they turned back. It was 3:00 pm and from then on, the confrontation will be reduced to a cannonade between enemy artillery on each side of the river. Steinheil will place 16 guns in front of his line and Jachwill, 33. The French artillery was initially outnumbered, but the division Partouneaux having arrived, its artillery came to reinforce the other guns already unlimbered. Wittgenstein will answer by placing 20 more guns in front of his left wing. Again outnumbered, the French batteries were forced to search protection behind the slopes of the heights on which they had been unlimbered.

Victor will take advantage of the night to withdraw, while the Russians will remain the next day on the battlefield, Russian skirmishers crossing the bridge and symbolically taking possession of the last French positions.

The Russians admit a loss of 400 men and wrote to have made 200 French prisoners. The losses of the officers on the French side (Martinien) show that it was the 124th line who suffered the most (14 officers wounded or killed), followed by the 37th line (4 officers wounded or killed), both belonging to the 8th division. In the 9th division, the 3rd provisional Croatian lost two officers as the 123rd line. The two Saxon regiments of the 28th division each lost an officer, such as the 4th cuirassiers and the 3rd cheva-légers. In the light of these figures, the French losses must therefore be at the same level as those of the Russians: 400 to 500 killed and wounded, to which could be added the 200 prisoners claimed by the diary of the 1st Russian Corps.

Victor will try to justify his failure to repel Wittgenstein by a lack of cavalry: “the cavalry of the IX Corps had not yet arrived, and that of the II, extremely exhausted and having eaten nothing for 36 hours for lack of resources, was not able to act as it should.” (Letter to Berthier of November 2nd).

The irresolution: from November 1st to 12th

On the Russian side, after Czarnicki’s clash, Wittgenstein will remain quite inactive and he will be later criticized for his inactivity. One can however understand this inactivity of the Russian general.
Indeed, Kutuzov’s objective after the second battle of Polotsk was to forbid the French to return to the right bank of the Oula and take control of Vitebsk. Czarnicki’s clash had accomplished the first part of the mission. On November 3rd, Kutuzov also asked Wittgenstein to occupy a good position in the region where he was, because, wrote Kutuzov to Wittgenstein, the army of Napoleon “will be forced to go from Orcha, on Sienno, Lepel, Dokchitsoui, and therefore his main forces will be directed against you.” This letter will reinforce Wittgenstein’s decision to stay in Czarnicki to defend the passage of the Oula. Moreover, the Russian general had confirmation, by the clash at Czarnicki, that the IX French Corps was in contact, and this was another reason for his circumspection and inaction. Finally, because of the bad weather, any movement of troops was expensive in men, even for the Russians, and Wittgenstein preferred not to make mass movements without a specific objective.

That is why the main Russian forces will remain in the region of Czarnicki and Smolinay until the battle of Smoliany on November 14th.

Wittgenstein however sent a strong vanguard of about 5,000 men under Alexseiev to Axeni to keep in touch with Victor. On November 4th, this vanguard broke up in two to better scout the area: Alexseiev stayed in Axeni to observe the roads of Sienno, Loukomlia and Tchereia with 1,500 infantry, 1,000 horsemen and 6 guns (25th Jäger, a battalion of the 23rd Jäger, the Rodianov II Cossacks, the Guard depot squadrons, the Mittau dragoons and 6 guns of the horse battery #3); Helfreich took the head of the other part of the vanguard and went to Boiaret to observe the area up to the Dwina, with 1,500 infantrymen, 500 cavalrymen and 6 guns (2nd and 3rd Jäger, the Platov Cossacks, the converged dragoons and the other 6 guns of the horse battery #3).

The other important move for the Russians of Wittgenstein during this period of inaction, was the surprise attack on Vitebsk. Harpe was at Benzenovichi with the Navajinsk Regiment, two squadrons of the Riga dragoon regiment and two Polish uhlans squadrons. Wittgenstein sent the 36th Jäger to this general, some Cossacks and four guns to strengthen him. Two squadrons of lamburg dragoons under Stolypin, who were on the banks of the Dwina to hunt down enemy marauders, joined him. Harpe received orders to march against Vitebsk. He left only one battalion,

Testimonies about the weather on November 1812

“Since the 15th, the weather is so bad, the cold so severe, and the privations so great that our soldiers are overwhelmed. The strongest of them resist with difficulty and the greater part, young and weak, succumbs under the weight of misery. This deplorable state of the troops which I command, a state which worsens every day, has not permitted me to make new attempts against the enemy.” (letter from Victor to Berthier, November 19th)

“Since the thaw makes the roads difficult, it is not appropriate for the artillery to stay any longer away from our main communication route.” (Orders from Victor, on the same day)
one squadron and two guns in Benzenovichi, and marched with the rest of his forces (about 2,000 men). He arrived on Vitebsk on the morning of November 8th, by the right bank of the Dwina. At the same time, Stolypin attacked by the left bank, in the Ostrovno road. As we have seen, Victor had only left a small infantry battalion of Berg Duchy at Vitepsk. This one was soon submerged. The Russians took the city and all the provisions there. They made 320 prisoners, and among them, general Pouget, governor of the city. By this action, Wittgenstein fulfilled the second part of Kutuzov’s orders, and put Napoleon in a difficult situation, because he hoped to be able to recover the supplies stored in Vitebsk...

When Napoleon learned of the loss of Vitebsk, he was at Smolensk, where he remained until November 14th to wait for the rearguard of the Grande Armée. From November 14th to 18th, the Battle of Krasnoi will take place (one day’s march from Smolensk on the Orcha road). All the retired army managed to pass, but at the cost of the loss of 20,000 men and more than 200 guns. On November 19th, the Grande Armée reached Orcha. At that moment, Napoleon had only 25,000 men fit for combat and 110 guns. From Orcha, Napoleon decided to go to Minsk. He did not have much choice because the only supplies still in the hands of the French were there. In addition, the road from Orcha to Mink was a spacious road, suitable for mass movements. Finally, this movement will bring Napoleon closer to Schwarzenberg. The only difficulty was the crossing of the Berezina, only possible at this place, by the bridge of Borisow.

Victor, for his part, ordered this troops to withdraw from Czarnicki to Sienno. Daendels had to join the main force at this location, with his division and the Castex cavalry brigade. But in doing so, he left Benzenovichi defenseless and the Vitebsk road as well. Wittgenstein will benefit, as we have seen to send Harpe against Vitepsk.

At Sienno, it seems that it was general Legrand, probably in better shape than two weeks earlier, who
took the head of the right column, composed of the two infantry divisions, Legrand and Daendels, as well as the brigade Castex.

Gouvion St Cyr was quite critical about Marshal Victor and his not very offensive attitude: “The illusions that he (himself) had had to return to Polotsk a few days after the junction of the IX Corps with the II, came from disappear”. It must be said that he wrote this twenty years after the events...

The arrival of Marshal Victor allowed St. Cyr to leave the troops finally on November 1st to better heal his wounds in Orcha. But when he arrived in this city, faced with the danger of seeing the west road cut by the Russians, he decided to go to Minsk, which he reached on November 11th, and then to Vilna.

A few days earlier, Oudinot, recovering from his wounds, wanted to join his men from Vilna and take the same way than St Cyr the other way around. Oudinot reached Minsk on October 30th, Borisow on November 1st, where he remained until the 4th of November: there was a rumor that the road to Lepel and his II Corps was cut off by the enemy. Finally, he left Borisow and reached Tchereia on November 5th, where he met Victor, coming from Sienno.

Indeed, after reaching Sienno on November 2nd, noticing that he was not being pursued by the Russians, Victor decided to go to Tchereia to place himself between Wittgenstein and Admiral Tchitchagov, and to keep a clear line of retreat for the remains of the Grande Armée.

Legrand led the march to Tchereia, which he reached on the evening of the 5th. He was followed by Girard, who finally stopped at Tolpin, halfway between Sienno and Tchereia. Then came Partouneaux, who will stop at Lipovichi. At the same time, Fournier’s light cavalry had gone to the village of Lukomlia with the order to search after the enemy. He conducted scouting in the directions of Lepel and Czarnicki.

In a letter to Marshal Berthier dated November 4th, Victor announced that a situation report of the II Corps had been made and that there were “barely 9,000 very tired combatants and almost no officers”.

In the meeting which took place between Victor and Oudinot at Tchereia on the 5th of November, it was decided that Oudinot would take command of the remains of the II Corps and go to Choloponitze. From there, he would return to Lepel to intercept Steinheil, because false information said that Steinheil was going to Minsk to join Tormasof. For Victor, with his IX corps, it had been decided that he would remain in contact with Wittgenstein without attacking him however, despite
Oudinot’s desire that his counterpart took the offensive against the Russian.

On this date (November 4th), the French still seemed optimistic about the outcome of the campaign. Indeed, Oudinot wrote about Victor: “I must tell him that if he resumed the offensive and managed to reject Wittgenstein beyond the Dwina (easy success in my opinion), it would fill only half the intention of the Emperor, because he still hopes the recovery of Polotsk.”

On November 6th, a clash took place near Lukomlia, between Fournier’s cavalry (without the Baden hussars remaining at Torbinka near Sienno) and the Russians (converged cuirassiers and a squadron of the Mittau dragoons). According to the diary of the 1st Russian Corps, Fournier suffered a loss of many prisoners. Victor wrote the same thing, but for the Russians!

The next day, November 7th, four battalions of converged Grenadiers, the regiment of Grodno hussars, supported by four guns, attacked Fournier again. But Legrand with his 6th division, had been sent in support, with also a French horse battery and half of the Bade horse battery. The Russians were repulsed, thanks in particular to a brilliant charge of Fournier’s cavalry.

Victor had planned to send more troops (the infantry brigade of the Berg Duchy, that of Baden Duchy and the 14th cuirassiers), if the Russian attack appeared to be a

Baron (then Count) François Fournier-Sarlovèse (1773-1827)
(Antoine-Jean Gros, Louvre Museum)
“The worst subject of the army”, known, among other things, for his history of duels with a General Dupont (unknown), which will last 19 years. He was second lieutenant in January 1792, then chef d’escadron at the 16th chasseurs à cheval in September 1793. He has already a solid reputation as a ribald, unruly, quarrelsome and duelist. He was too noticed for his unjustified absences and misrepresented accounts. So, he was removed in 1794 and did not resume service until August 1797 as aide-de-camp of Augereau.

Brigadier (Colonel) of the 12th Hussars in May 1799, he distinguished himself at Marengo but poorly noticed by Bonaparte. He took part in a sedition of generals in Paris against Bonaparte in 1802 and was under house arrest until April 1805.

His friend Lasalle had him reincorporated among the hussars in 1807. He served greatly at Eylau and Friedland. Appointed General de brigade on June 25th, 1807, despite of his excesses.

He moved to the 5th division of Dragoons in Spain in September 1808 and served in the Peninsula until October 1811 (present in La Coruña). He gained the nickname of "devil" by the Spaniards.

In May 1812, he took command of the 31st Cavalry Brigade. Made General de division on November 11th, he was Wounded at La Berezina. During the campaign of Saxony, he commanded the 6th Light Cavalry division in the 3rd Army Corps. He was present at Gross-Beeren and then at Leipzig. Dismissed at the end of October for having professing to draw his saber against Napoleon.
larger offensive of Wittgenstein. But these units did not have to intervene.

On November 8th, Victor and Oudinot gave orders to put their plan of separation of their two Corps into action. That’s why Berg’s brigade took Legrand’s place in Lukomlia.

On November 9th, the elements of the IX Corps remained where they were, in Chereia and Lukomlia, but the remnants of the II Corps took the direction of Choloponitze.

But a new order of Napoleon, received on November 10th, will put an end to the plan provided by the two marshals: indeed, a few days before arriving at Smolensk, Napoleon sent orders to Victor to repel Wittgenstein beyond the Dwina.

It was then decided that on the 11th of November, the two Corps would march on Czarnicki, by two parallel roads: the II corps on the right and the IX on the left. The II Corps had to return to Tchereia and the whole IX Corps to Lukomlia, already occupied by part of it. Oudinot would have preferred that his II Corps will overflow the Russians by their right, starting from Choloponitze and reaching Lepel. But he finally followed the advice of Victor, who saw better to approach the enemy before Czarnicki, the two army Corps united.

On the evening of November 12th, the II corps bivouacked on the road from Tchereia to Czarnicki, near Kamienka. Victor, who had to take a parallel road to the left, realized that this road would force him to be separated from Oudinot by the Ousveia, almost 6 miles apart. He then decided to take the same route as Oudinot, his units taking the head of the column.

His vanguard under Fournier’s command was composed by the Baden hussars, the chevau-légers garde of Hesse-Darmstadt (the other two regiments of the IX Corps cavalry were at Lukomlia); the 1st brigade of the 12th infantry division (29th French light regiment and 4th battalion of the 10th light infantry regiment); and a French battery: about 3,000 men.

On the evening of November 12th, Fournier reached Troukhanowichi, after having repulsed the enemy vanguard of about 5,000 men. This Russian vanguard had reunited its two groups, that of Alexseiev (2,500 men and 6 guns) and that of Helfreich (2,000 men and 6 guns), in this village of Troukhanovichi.

The Battle of Smoliany: November 14th

On November 13th, a greater clash took place at Axenzi, between the vanguard of Fournier and that of Alexseiev. Fournier will receive reinforcement from the other two brigades of the 12th division (4,500 to 5,000 men), while Steinheil, stationed at Smoliany, will send later three regiments of infantry in support of Alexseiev: about 8,000 men in each
side. The clash begun at 10 am. The Russians resisted at first obstinately, then, in numerical inferiority because of the intervention of the rest of the 12th French division, they withdrew. Then, they received the reinforcement of the three regiments sent by Steinheil and took advantage of it to resume the fight and retook tentatively Axenzi. The combat for this village will finally last two hours, without real winner. Alexseiev will finish to retreat again and will stop for the night, between Axenzi and Smoliany, 2 miles from Smoliany. The diary of the 1st Russian Corps notes that “the loss which he experienced during his retreat was very considerable, because of the imprudent manner in which some regiments of infantry attempted to support themselves in the woods by scattering too much in skirmishers”. It may be noted that it appears that the regiments in question were those, which were surprised already a month earlier at Bononia, in the same conditions and also suffered heavy losses (the 2nd and 3rd Jäger regiments).

Oudinot wrote that the French had lost between 150 and 200 men in those two days of skirmishes (November 12th and 13th) between the two vanguards.

After this fight favorable to the French, Victor will pursue Jachwill and will approach the Russians firmly settled on Smoliany. The clash in Smoliany on November 14th, will be an French assault against a strong position, Wittgenstein waiting that the French took the initiative. 27,000 Russians will be opposed to 19,000 French and allies, the 7,500 men of Oudinot not having intervened (see Appendix 10). Only by the knowledge of these figures and the type of battle that will take place, it is clear that Victor's attack could not succeed.

On the morning of the 14th, Jachwill, who had joined Alexseiev, was between Axenzi and Smoliany, about 2 miles from Smoliany. His vanguard, reduced to two regiments of infantry, the Mittau dragoons and six guns of the horse battery #3, was in contact with the French. The general reserve of General Fock, which had been sent to Lepel on the November 11th, for fear of a von Wrede Bavarian excursion towards that town, was back on this morning. Fock was deployed behind Czarnicki, on the left of the Russian main line. On the far right, Colonel Rüdiger, at the head of the converged grenadiers of the 5th and 14th divisions, the Grodno hussars and 4 guns, was in Polchavichi (at about 4 miles from Smoliany) and will not join the battle for Smoliany. The Lithuanian infantry regiment was in Doubrowna to lean Rüdiger to the Russian main force, and will not participate of the battle either.

On the future battlefield, the main Russian line was deployed facing east, while the French will arrive from the south-east, by the road of Sienno.
Sazonov’s infantry (from the right wing Steinheil), and part of Adadurov’s (right wing too), were deployed behind the village of Smoliany. This infantry was between a small stream in its front and the Kulomlia on its rear. The left of this infantry leaned on the woods bordering the Seechanka River. The village of Smoliany was occupied by many skirmishers, protected by the position battery #14, placed on one of the heights between the Lukomlia and Smoliany.

Map 20: The battle of Smoliany – November 14th, 1812
(from the Atlas of Buturlin, author collection)
The left wing Berg, combined with the remains of Steinheil’s right wing, was in a second line, on the opposite bank of the Lukomlia. The artillery of these troops was deployed on the far left of its infantry and thus protected the right flank of the front line.

At 11 am, Victor attacked Jachwill’s vanguard on the Sienno road at Smoliany, with Fournier’s cavalry, followed by the 12th infantry division Partouneaux. Marshal Victor himself led the 28th division Girard and the cuirassiers Doumerc to circumvent the right flank of Jachwill. The 26th division Daendels had to follow the vanguard of Fournier, and constitute a second line for Victor. Jachwill managed to retreat in good order and went to find refuge behind the first Russian line of Steinheil, placing his 6 horse battery cannons #3 to the right of the position battery #14.

According to the diary of the 1st Russian Corps, while Victor was advancing against Smoliany and engaging Jachwill, Oudinot, who was in reserve, would have gone against Rüdiger who was in Polchavichi. The fight would have been very moderate on this zone and would give no result. Neither Oudinot nor Victor spoke of it elsewhere.

The French pursuing Jachwill, arrived on Smoliany by the Sienno road, in front of the Russian right wing. They were

---

**Baron Jean-Baptiste Girard**  
(1775-1815)  
(Ecole française, artist unknown from http://www.napoleon-empire.net/personnages/)  
Volunteer in September 1793, reserved in Italy between 1794 and 1804. He was present at Marengo; at Austerlitz too, as Deputy Chief of Staff of the Cavalry Reserve. Made General de brigade in November 1806, he commanded a brigade of the division Suchet during the campaign of Poland in 1807. He passed with his division in Spain in 1808. He became General de division in September 1809. He distinguished himself in the battle of the Arzobispo in November 1809. He then commanded the 1st division of the 5th Corps Mortier and distinguished himself at its head in Badajoz, on February 7th, 1811. He commanded temporarily this same 5th Corps at the Battle of La Albuera on May 16th, 1811.

He let himself surprised by General Hill in Arroyo-Molinos the 28th of November 1811. Recalled to France in december 1811, he commanded the 28th division in May 1812. He was wounded at the passage of the Berezina.

He served as the head of the 3rd division of the 3rd Corps in Lützen in 1813, where he is wounded. Then he served in Magdeburg where it remained blocked until 1814.

On June 16th, 1815, he was mortally wounded at Ligny at the head of the 7th division of the 2nd Corps Reille. Made Duc de Ligny on the battlefield, he died because of his wounds on June 27th, 1815.
received by a violent crossfire provided by two large batteries of 18 guns each: the position battery #6 and half of the light battery #11 on the right; battery position #14 and half horse battery #3 on the left. Partouneaux’s infantry attempted an attack on the Russian right at first, but in the face of this deadly artillery fire, the French was forced to step back and deploy behind the protection of the village of Smoliany, protected from Russian guns. The other two infantry divisions of Victor (26th division Daendels and 28th Girard) followed the division Partouneaux, and Victor was forced to organize a frontal assault against the Russians and Smoliany.

It was the 28th division Girard which was charged of attacking Smoliany; The 12th division Partouneaux on his right, the 26th division Daendels in support, in second line.

Fearing (and rightly so) the frontal assault that was looming, Victor resumed his idea of bypassing the Russian forces by his right, hoping to force Wittgenstein to step back in front of the threat on his lines of communication towards Polotsk. Victor ordered the 12th division Partouneaux on the right to move towards Botscherkovo, thus leaving the battlefield.

It would probably have been more judicious to send to the bridge Botscherkovo, cavalry rather than infantry, because without Partouneaux, Victor had only 12,000 men (including 9,000 infantrymen) to oppose the 27,000 Russians (including 22,000 infantrymen)! It is true that the 6,000 men of the Fock Reserve was more than two miles from the battlefield, probably invisible to Victor. It is also true that Victor could hope in the arrival of the 7,500 men of Oudinot, but his movement of circumvention appeared imprudent.

On the battlefield itself, the village of Smoliany was taken and resumed six times during the day. In the course of the fight, Count Hochberg’s Baden brigade (from 26th division Daendels) got particularly noticed for its combativity. But the village will ultimately remain in the hands of the Russians. An attempt by the French cavalry on the right wing of Victor’s forces was soon abandoned,
again because of the Russian artillery deployed on the right bank of the Lukomlia.

In the evening, Oudinot finally arrived on the battlefield, but too late to participate in the battle. The soldiers on both sides slept where the night surprised them, waiting for what their respective commander would decide.

Victor considered the options available to him on the evening of November 14. He will present these options in a letter to Oudinot: The two marshals could either maneuver by “the left to pass the Osveia and attack [the Russians] by their right flank”; either attack directly by Smoliany, “where the passage of the Osveia is more difficult than the first [project]”; or “maneuver by [the] right with a strong column send by Botscheikovo to Kamen, to threaten the communications of the enemy on Polotsk” (letter from Victor to Oudinot, November 14th, at 8 pm).

The third option was preferred by Marshal Victor, but his opinion was far from being shared by Oudinot: “If your Excellency persists with the intention of making a movement that I consider dangerous and useless, I beg you to explain, because I do not hear that my responsibility is engaged, and that I wish, if it is time still, to put myself in a position to save, if it is possible, my troops from a disaster that you could prepare them” (reply from Oudinot the same evening).

The controversy will increase a step the next day, November 15th. Indeed, Victor had started the movement by the right of the third option, sending the 12th division to Botschekovo (or Botscheikovo). In addition, he planned to carry his entire army corps after Partouneaux, towards Botschekovo. He wanted to force Oudinot, with his 7,500 men, to take his place in front of Czarnicki and to fix Wittgenstein on this position. In fact, Oudinot did not accept this fait accompli whereas he had answered that he did not want to follow this plan, which was imprudent in his eyes.

While Partouneaux had continued his movement towards Botschekovo and was halfway between Smoliany and this village about 12 miles from Smoliany, Victor noticed that Oudinot had defected and had begun to break camp and move to Troukhanoichi without warning. So, Victor stopped his movement and repatriated the division Partouneaux on Smoliany.

The dissension between Napoleon’s two marshals played an important role in Victor’s failure. According to Oudinot (Wittgenstein thought so), it was necessary to avoid any unnecessary or enterprising movement of troops, as it cost as much as a pitched battle. Victor’s plan, which seemed more in keeping with Napoleon’s desire to remove Wittgenstein from the line of retreat of the Grande Armée, seems in fact imprudent and dangerous. As we have said, Victor’s plan would had left against Wittgenstein and to protect the defensive line of the Grande Armée only 7,000 men, certainly seasoned but also exhausted. Even if Wittgenstein could have been afraid of being cut off from the Dwina and
Benzenovichi by Victor, would he really fall back in face of this threat? We can doubt it.

In the clash of November 14th, Victor will admit only 150 killed and 700 wounded (transported to Toloschin), mainly in the ranks of the IX Corps, the II Corps not having intervened in the fight.

For the two days of clashes (skirmish of the 13th and the battle of the 14th), the Russians estimated that the French losses totaled nearly 3,000 men, including 650 prisoners for the IX corps and 250 in the II corps. They themselves admitted the loss of nearly 3,000 men in their ranks.

According to Martinien, the French lost 16 officers on November 13th, mainly in Partouneaux: in the brigade Billard (9 for the 29th light infantry regiment) and in the brigade Camus (4 for the 44th line regiment). Another 36 officers were killed or wounded on November 14th: 7 in the Duchy of Berg contingent and 5 in the Duchy of Baden (from the 26th division Daendels). The brigades Billard and Camus of the 12th division Partouneaux, lost another 16 officers (at the beginning of the battle) and the Saxon von Rechten regiment (of the 28th division Girard), 5 officers. Martinien does not note any loss of Polish officers for the battle: it is strange because it was the division Girard which gave the first assault against Smoliany (where the Saxon of the von Rechten regiment lost 5 officers).

If we keep the ratio of 1 officer for 20-25 men, we can count on a loss, for the two days (November 13th and 14th), of 1,200 to 1,500 killed and wounded in the French, and maybe 500 to a thousand prisoners and lost: a total loss of about 2,000 men, mainly in the IX Corps.

Oudinot estimated that he has barely 5,000 men able to fight in his II Corps on November 16th.

From Smoliany to the bank of the Berezina: November 15th to 26th

After the battle of Smoliany, the two French Corps will again act separately: Oudinot took his bled dry II Corps to Tchereia, but placed a brigade of the 8th division and the cavalry of Castex at Lukomlia, and the cuirassiers of Doumerc at Antopol; The IX corps marched to Sienno and stopped at Krosnagora. Fournier-Sarlovèze was sent to Kanievo to observe Boiare on the road to Benzenovitschi. He had in his command three of his regiments of cavalry and the 1st brigade of the 12th division. Oudinot decided to keep with him only 38 pieces of artillery, mostly horse artillery and pieces of 12; The rest was sent to Orcha.

The two marshals will remain in their respective positions until November 19th, when new orders from Napoleon arrived. David Chandler
and Digby Smith both estimate that Victor still has 13,000 men in his IX corps at that time.

For his part, Wittgenstein stayed eight days on the battlefield, after the battle of Smoliany.

Meanwhile, Harpe (from Vitepsk) and Vlastov (from Drouja) had joined the commander-in-chief. Wittgenstein only kept in touch with Victor by a vanguard under Harpe's command, of about 4,000 men strong. On November 20th, Wittgenstein received an order from Kutuzov asking him to delay as far as possible the Grande Armée, which was coming towards him, by taking a good defensive position. This would allow Kutuzov and Tchichagov to join together on this position and to smash Napoleon. This order justified that Wittgenstein remained in Czarnicki, which appeared to him as the ideal central defensive position.

On the 18th of November, Napoleon learned two bad news: Victor’s failure to repulse Wittgenstein, and especially the capture of Minsk by Tchichagov on November 16th. Because of this news, Napoleon decided to go to Vilna, by skirting Minsk from the north. By this movement, he could take with him the forces of Victor, Oudinot and von Wrede and even, if all went well, those of Macdonald.

He sent his orders to Victor, Oudinot and Dombrowski. The polish general withdrawn from Minsk to Borisov, to make this plan possible. It was essential for his good achievement to keep the Borisov

Letter from Oudinot to Victor
November 15th, 1812

“The interests of the Emperor's affairs would require two things: the first, to give battle to Wittgenstein and compel him to recross the Dwina; The second, to maintain our communications with the Grande Armée. Can we achieve this double goal? That's what I do not think. The troops of the II Corps are tired, dying of hunger, the units disorganized. This Corps may be reduced to less than 5,000 combatants. Every march, every night of bivouac, takes away a great number of us. I think I have perceived that the troops of the IX corps are also spreading in the country in numbers at least as great as those of the II Corps. We can not promise ourselves great results with such troops, and, even if you obtain some advantages, their weakness would put you in the impossibility to benefit from them. Now, in the circumstances in which the army is, an ordinary success would lead nowhere, while the slightest reverse loses us. It seems to me now that the Emperor's first interest is that you should keep this army as intact as possible, because then, it will be able to protect the flank of the Grande Armée and to contain the enemy, which nothing could stop more, if it was beaten. It would therefore be necessary to choose a position which enabled it to maintain its communication with the Grande Armée, by allowing it to refuse a battle which would not offer certain advantages. Perhaps we shall obtain this result by placing the IX corps at Sienno and the II at Tschereia. I submit this idea to you, Monsieur le Marechal, without being less disposed to conform to yours and to continue to act according to your plans. I ask you to consider that each march costs you as much as a great battle, and that, if we go to the enemy, we must approach it frankly with all our capabilities and without hesitation.”

Letter from Oudinot to Berthier
November 16th, 1812:

“The regiments of the II Corps are without leaders and disorganized; The soldiers perish by the cold and lack of food; I have at this moment barely 5,000 combatants with immense equipment, which I am not even in a condition to protect”.

Letter from Oudinot to Victor
Bridge intact and under French control.

It was therefore on November 19th that Napoleon’s new orders reached the two marshals: Oudinot had to cross the Berezina at Borisov and go to the Minsk road to protect the crossing of the other troops; Victor had to replace him at Tchereia to form the rearguard of the incoming Grande Armée, and to interpose between Wittgenstein and Borisow. The Castex Brigade should be placed under Victor’s orders, while Oudinot had to receive the reinforcement of Dombrowski’s cavalry. It seems that this last request was a dead letter because we find Castex with Oudinot on November 23rd.

The II Corps was, on November 20th, at Obstchougha and on the 21st, between Kroupki and Bobr (map 16). It was at Kroupki on November 22nd at 3 am, that Oudinot collected “with great displeasure” the remains of Dombrowski, who abandoned Borisov, pushed by the vanguard of Tchichagov under the orders of Lambert (4,500 men and 36 guns). Dombrowski had only about 1,200 men remaining of the 4 or 5,000 men he had when he was at Minsk. 460 men of the 7th Wurtemberg line infantry regiment, 330 of the 6th battalion of the 93rd Line Infantry regiment, 300 converged officers and non-commissioned officers and 150 men in the cavalry. Oudinot himself had at Kroupki 2,500 infantrymen and 400 cavalrymen of his II corps. It thus appears that in the Borisow affair, Dombrowski lost 1,500 killed, 2,500 wounded and eight guns, while Lambert’s losses amounted to about 2,000 men.

At the same time, Victor, who had left Krasnogora, reached Tchereia on November 22nd. He left Tchereia the next day to go to Borisow by Kolodnitsa. On the evening of the 23rd, he was in Batury, but there, he met enemy forces which occupied Choloponitze. Indeed, warned by his outposts of Victor’s movements, Wittgenstein realized that Napoleon was going south of his position, on Borisow, and that he could not remain at Czarnicki. So, he decided to stay in touch with Victor. Thus, a rather serious meeting took place on November 23rd, between Batury and

---

**Letter from General Albert to General Legrand (November 17th, 1812)**

“I have the honor to inform you that this evening, at about 10 pm, a party of Cossacks, hussars, and peasants came to the village of Sloboda, where we spent the night of the 15th, at a little league from my position. This party, according to the different reports which have been made to me by several men left behind, was at first about thirty horses. The village of Sloboda was filled with wounded and sick soldiers and most of the stragglers of the 2nd and 9th Corps; some were taken, others beaten and robbed and then sent back. Several bags were ransacked and returned to our soldiers. I can give you for certain, General, and for having seen him myself, that from 6 am till 9, at least 1,500 men, left in the villages on the right and on the left, passed at Koudilova, a large part of which had no sacks or weapons. At last, the enemy scorns them enough not to make them prisoners; I have, moreover, seen nothing more pitiful and more distressing at the same time.”
Choloponitze, occupied by Vlastov. At 3 pm, a confrontation took place between the converged hussars and two regiments of Cossacks, against the vanguard of Victor, commanded by Delaitre (with his 30th light cavalry brigade, four battalions of infantry and two guns of the horse battery of Berg). The Russian cavalry, supported by infantry and artillery, repulsed the French. The Russians said they have made 1,500 prisoners on this occasion.

The next day, it was Victor’s rearguard, composed mainly by the division Daendels, which was attacked by Harpe, 2 miles before Batary, on the road to Tchereia. The Russians jostled Daendels. They recognize the loss of 183 men in their ranks, and claim 300 enemy prisoners. Victor, however, could continue his movement towards Borisow. He wanted to reach this town by Kostrica, but this more direct route being impracticable for the artillery, he decided to go through Chavroï, where he bivouacked on the 24th. He then reached Lochnitsa, on the 25th of November, in the evening.

In a letter dated of November 24th, Victor wrote that the IX Corps does not have more than 12,000 infantry men at that date and that Fournier’s cavalry has only 800 horsemen.

Meanwhile, on November 23rd, after taking Borisov, Tchichagov’s vanguard (about 3,000 men under Pahlen’s command, Lambert being wounded) continued to advance. Near Nemonitza, it met Oudinot, who had collected the remains of Dombrowski. The French marshal then had about 2,500 infantry, 1,100 cavalry (including the brigade Castex) and 12 guns with him. Oudinot attacked the Russians who were repulsed in a great disorder, abandoning 1,500 prisoners. They repassed Borisow’s bridge, but destroyed it behind them. The Russians deployed their artillery on the other bank of the Berezina to prevent Oudinot from rebuilding the bridge. The French lost in this engagement nearly 1,000 men, killed, wounded and prisoners.

Letter from Victor to Berthier
November 21st, 1812

“The 9th Corps loses many people by diseases; The weakened soldiers walk with difficulty. The 12th division, which was the one with more young men*, has lost more than 2,000 men in its last eight days. There are no precautions to be taken to try to keep the soldiers together, especially when they are on the march, and yet many go astray who do not reappear.”

* in a letter to Berthier, dated on November 17th, the General Partouneaux writes about his division: “I have done all I can to ensure that the troops composing the division entrusted to me, worthy deserve the esteem of the Emperor; because they were composed of young soldiers, a large part of whom were conscript refractaires. This division has responded to my care, it is excellent: it has suffered greatly by fatigue, privations, and by fire...”

Victor, on his side, reached Borisow on November 26th. The next morning, after an icy night, he went to Studianka, leaving the division Partouneaux and the cavalry brigade Delaitre for Borisow’s guard.
Napoleon, who was at Bobr on the 23rd, learning of the impossibility of recovering Borisow’s bridge, ordered Oudinot to actively search for a ford along the river. It was the general Corbineau who discovered the ford at Studianka. The Poles of his brigade (8th chevau-légers) were able to make themselves understood by local peasants, who gave them the indication for a practicable ford. Corbineau had finally left von Wrede about November 10th and arrived on the 21st at Zembin on the west bank of the Berezina. It was there that he learned that the Russians occupied the bridge of Borisow. He then threw himself back to Studianka and discovered the ford he crossed immediately. He joined Oudinot at Lochnitsa on the 22nd, followed by 450 men of the 6th Polish infantry whom Dombrowski had abandoned on the right bank of the Berezina during his disastrous retreat. Oudinot immediately occupied the ford of Studianka on both banks. It was there, at Studianka, that the remains of the Grande Armée joined him on November 26th. Victor had met them on the evening of November 24th near Lochnitsa.

All were dismayed when they saw the state of this Grande Armée. As one witness wrote: “As the IX Corps is still ignorant of our disasters, which have been hidden even to its chiefs, we can imagine the astonishment we cause to men who, instead of having before them a formidable and conquering column, saw men like specters covered with rags, women’s pelisses, pieces of carpets or ragged cloaks, pierced by bullets, and feet twisted in cloths and rags”.

Thus, the separate actions on the left wing of the Grande Armée ended here.

From 26th to 28th November, it was the Battle of Berezina, but this action is outside the scope of this study.

However, by couriers exchanged after the passage of the Berezina, it can be learned that on November 27th, the 26th division still had about 4,000 men, the 28th division, just under 3,000, and the Fournier cavalry, 400.

The independence of von Wrede

We had left von Wrede on November 1st, at Globukoje. He succeeded in persuading the Duke of Bassano, Foreign Minister of Napoleon, present at Vilna,
that the small Bavarian Corps was necessary on the position of Globukoje, for the safety of Vilna.

On November 4\textsuperscript{th}, he estimated that he had about 4,000 men under his command. On the 7\textsuperscript{th}, when he said he had learned that Corbineau was not to be under his command but with the II Corps, he said he had only 1,937 infantry men ... According to Marbot, von Wrede lied to Corbineau, telling him to have received express orders to keep his brigade with him. But an order from Oudinot - a real one this time - arrived on November 7\textsuperscript{th}, declaring that von Wrede should never have kept the brigade Corbineau in his service.

Corbineau will still stay a few days in the service of von Wrede, before actually joining Oudinot and the Grande Armée by the ford on Berezina, November 21\textsuperscript{st}, like we see.

On November 10\textsuperscript{th}, in a letter to Bassano, von Wrede wrote that he could soon command 13,000 men. Reinforcements had indeed been promised to him: The brigade Franceschi (a French infantry marching regiment, two cavalry marching regiments, four guns); the brigade Coutard composed by the 4\textsuperscript{th} Westphalian regiment, the two battalions of Fusiliers of Hesse Darmstadt, and 8 guns, arrived at the end of October from Swedish Pomerania; and finally, Bavarians too. Coutard will arrive on November 13\textsuperscript{th}, Franceschi on 14\textsuperscript{th}. The Bavarian reinforcements were, in fact, the convalescents which were sent back to him, and which arrived in the same days: 1,000 to 1,200 more men. Von Wrede complained a few days later that with 2,000 muskets he would increase his numbers by the same number of muskets, by arming unarmed Bavarian soldiers. However, it is difficult to get a fair idea of the forces that the Bavarian general will really have: 13,000 is an unreliable maximum; Rather between 6 and 9,000 men.

Von Wrede will stay until November 23\textsuperscript{rd} near Globukoje. Despite Oudinot’s request to join him on Berezino, the Bavarian will persist in staying on Globukoje.

It is November 23\textsuperscript{rd}, that he will finally begin a slight movement towards Oudinot: he will join Dogitschi but will stay there until November 30\textsuperscript{th} and will only send Franceschi to Berezino.

Von Wrede wrote on November 27\textsuperscript{th} that General Coutard’s brigade had seen its strength diminished by a quarter in the space of eight days; he also noted that Franceschi’s cavalry had more than 300 ill men.

At the end of November or the beginning of December, von Wrede received from Major-General Berthier an order dated from November 28\textsuperscript{th}, which required

\begin{quote}
Letter from Corbineau to von Wrede (Novembre 8\textsuperscript{th}, 1812)

“I have the honor to inform you that I have arrived at Boïare, where I intend to remain until the day after tomorrow, and where I still hope to receive orders to rejoin you, for I am convinced that some reinforcements will be sent to you, and that you will receive order to operate on Disna; Then you’ll need cavalry and I’ll be closed to you. If I am obliged to pass through Borisov to join Marshal Oudinot, I shall not be with him before twelve days, and at that time, he will certainly be at Polotsk. I have not yet been able to obtain any information about the enemy.”
\end{quote}
him to go to Wileyka, to collect food, and to secure bridges over the Willia. He will obey, but this movement will be very difficult because of the coldness and the Cossacks. Finally, von Wrede will reach Vilna on December 9th with 2,000 survivors, but the intervention of Marshal Ney will be necessary to prevent these survivors from falling into the hands of the Russians.

Placed on the Napoleon Series: June 2018