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Debate

At What Time on 15 June 1815 Did Wellington Learn of Napoleon's Attack on the Prussians?

John Hussey

The exact time when news reached Brussels that Napoleon had attacked the Allies is perhaps the oldest and most troublesome historical question concerning 15 June 1815. It became a matter of internal discussion among the Prussians after the campaign, and in 1847 it led their General Staff to send a detailed statement of their final views to Captain William Siborne, whose *History* of the 1815 campaign, published in 1844, seemed to them wrong on this matter. In essence, they claimed that Lieutenant-General von Ziethen, commanding the Prussian I Corps, the front-line general bearing the weight of Napoleon's attack on Charleroi, sent a message to Wellington asking for help and that it reached Brussels by 9 a.m., though the Duke issued no orders until 5 p.m. Siborne had stated the time of arrival as around 3 p.m., in line with most English witnesses. Now, despite certain reservations, Siborne accepted the general Prussian argument and amended the third edition of his book accordingly.¹ This, however, highlighted the question: if the Duke received the news so early, why did he wait until 5 p.m. that day before issuing any orders?

On the whole, British authors did not follow Siborne in this revised timing of the receipt of news, and the argument tended to divide increasingly upon national lines as the nineteenth century passed. Today the matter has been raised once more in Mr Peter Hofschröder's book *1815: The Waterloo Campaign* and his article in *War in History*, both

¹ Capt. W Siborne, *The History of the Campaign in France and Belgium in 1815* (London, 1844 and 1848). A significant amount of additional primary material dated 15 June 1815 was published in the *Wellington Supplementary Despatches (hereafter WSD)* x, (London, 1863) but of course Siborne had died in 1849.

of 1998,² and so it seemed to me worthwhile to set down the evidence a further time using *primary* documents, i.e. those written *on* or *quite soon after* 15 June 1815. Only after these had been analysed would it be right to study the memoranda and claims made later – often many years later – and thereby judge whether and how far the latter were trustworthy.³ And I have to say that the conclusion I now reach from the primary evidence is that the news of the French attack came first to Brussels through the Netherlands–Hanoverian communications chain and not through the Prussian, and came in the late afternoon. It did not reach Brussels in the morning.

After briefly summarizing the principal intelligence reports of early summer 1815 and the inadequate steps Wellington and Blücher took to prepare against a full-scale attack by Napoleon, I shall examine orders and intelligence information issued from Prussian headquarters at Namur⁴ from noon on 14 June, the sequence of reports sent to Namur during the next morning by the Prussians in the Charleroi sector, and the Gneisnau/Blücher message to Brussels written at noon on the 15th. I shall then deal with the situation in Brussels over this same period before examining the series of reports that reached Brussels during the day up to the time when the Duke issued his First or 5 p.m. Orders.

The Coming of the Attack, June 1815

The skill with which Napoleon used ‘disinformation’ in the early summer of 1815 must always remain an object lesson. War had not been declared though the frontiers were on alert, and the stream of messages reaching the Allies indicated a variety of divergent intentions which were difficult to reconcile: French troops might be reported as

² Peter Hofschröder, *1815: The Waterloo Campaign: Wellington, His German Allies and the Battles of Ligny and Quatre Bras* (London, 1998) (hereafter *PH 1815*), a book which is valuable on Prussian and general German aspects of the campaign, but contains a controversial interpretation of Wellington’s motives and actions, including his ‘falsifying’ the record of when he learnt of Napoleon’s attack; see also Mr Hofschröder’s ‘Did the Duke of Wellington Deceive His Prussian Allies in the Campaign of 1815?’, *War in History*, V (1998) [hereafter *PH WH*].

³ This may seem too harsh a rule, but the fact is that the impact of Waterloo was so great that what passed beforehand very quickly became confused in memory, and *specific* claims require the most careful scrutiny and corroboration. A very simple instance will suffice. Col. Gomm was then aged 30 and on the staff; he started writing his ‘Journal of Operations . . . from June 15 to August 8, 1815’ while marching on Paris in late June after the battle. Yet he begins by dating the French attack a day too early: ‘Information of the French army having forced the passage of the Sambre at Charleroi, on the 14th [*sic*], reached the British headquarters at Brussels only on the evening of the 15th’ (*Letters and Journals of FM Sir W. M. Gomm*, ed. F Carr-Gomm, (London, 1881) I p. 352). If that was possible within a week or so, then we should caution ourselves that recollections penned many years later may be *corroborative*, but must be underpinned by primary evidence before acceptance.

⁴ To avoid confusion I write of Wellington’s and Blücher’s ‘headquarters’ and the command posts of subordinate formations like the Prince of Orange’s or Ziethen’s as ‘HQs’.

coming north but other units were seen moving away from the frontiers, and roads and bridges inside France were being cut and broken in preparation for the Allied invasion.⁵ Was Napoleon planning to concentrate near Valenciennes, or near Maubeuge, at Laon, or towards the Moselle and the central Rhine, or was he intent on moving west to crush the Royalists in the Vendée?

In March and April the Allies had been almost too weak in Belgium to ensure a successful defence of the Netherlands capital, Brussels, and Louis XVIII's refuge in Ghent, and at the end of April the fear of an attack against western Belgium had led Wellington to seek assurances of Prussian support at the Tirlemont meeting on 3 May.⁶ But by late May the steady growth of Allied forces in central Europe, and the numerical superiority of the Anglo-Allied and Prussian forces in Belgium totalling nearly 220 000 men and over 500 guns (against the Armée du Nord's not quite 130 000 men and under 350 guns) left Wellington and Blücher and Gneisau all far too confident. Blücher's comment of 2 June that 'if orders to advance do not arrive and the unrest in France increases, I shall do as I did in Silesia and go to battle. Wellington will probably accompany me' cannot be read as concern against being attacked;⁷ on 9 June Gneisau considered that the French would 'fall back' to concentrate as far south as 'the Aisne, Somme and the Marne' (i.e. some 80 or more miles south of Charleroi), and on the 12th he added that 'the danger of attack has almost disappeared'; for his part the Duke was of opinion on the 13th that 'there is nothing new here. . . I think we are now too strong for him [Napoleon] here.' Anyone who studies the intelligence accumulating from the Allied advanced posts in June will notice that Ziethen and his subordinate Steinmetz, the Netherlander van Merlen and the Hanoverian outpost commander, Dörnberg, all reported significant activity which merited the most careful attention; perhaps over-repetition and the contradictions in Napoleon's reported whereabouts

⁵ On 12 May the Prussians reported that the French were breaking down bridges on the Sambre and placing cannon to cover them defensively. As late as 24 May stiff letters were being exchanged with the French concerning the shooting of a Hanoverian hussar at the neutral frontier: *Wellington Despatches*, rev. edn (London, 1852) (hereafter *WD*), VIII, p. 109 and *WSD* XIV, 1872, p. 554.

⁶ For Tirlemont, see *PH 1815*, pp. 52, 116-17, which indicates that Blücher's Chief of Staff, Gneisau, ADC, Nostitz, and Thurn und Taxis, who arrived two days later, do not suggest any specific discussion of an attack on the Prussians, but speak as though it was Wellington who was thought at risk of attack: *PHWH*, p. 181. My own view, as set out in the *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* LXXVI (1998), pp. 55-9, is that mutual cooperation against attack was of course a basic premise in the discussions, but that they were specifically about an attack on Wellington in western Belgium, the problem of the mutinous Saxon contingent in Blücher's army, and the routes for an eventual march into France.

⁷ Blücher to Hardenberg, 2 June 1815, in Lt-Gen. W. von Unger, *Blücher* (2 vols, Berlin, 1908) II, p. 271.

and intentions led to insufficient notice being taken of these reports in both Allied headquarters until almost too late.⁸

Although as late as 12 June Gneissnau wrote that the danger of attack had virtually gone, thereafter (but too slowly) he began to change his mind and realize that Ziethen's I Corps was dangerously spread out extremely close to the French frontier, and that French units were moving westwards from the Moselle towards the Meuse valley and Sedan. On the 13th Colonel Pfuel, assistant to the Prussian QMG, Grolman, went to Brussels to seek the Duke's promise of support; he apparently reported that the Duke was ready to concentrate his forces to his left in 22 hours. Blücher called for a distant reserve Corps to move forward 40 miles from Trier on the Moselle to Arlon, where it would still be some 40 miles from the French fortress of Sedan and about 75 miles from Prussian headquarters, but this move would take time to accomplish and was not accompanied by any order to the main army. For it was not on the 12th or 13th but *at mid-morning on the 14th* that Gneissnau began to consider concentrating the main army against attack. At noon he sent a message to IV Corps at Liège warning of an imminent offensive and requesting it to form up in readiness to march to Hannut (23 miles to its west), and to III Corps at Ciney with similar warnings and a request to pull in outlying detachments.⁹ But Liège is some 52 miles from Ziethen's HQ at Charleroi, Hannut is still at least 30, while Namur is 21 miles from Charleroi, and Ciney 17 miles beyond Namur. The history of the succeeding days gives ample evidence that Belgian roads could not cope easily with hurried mass movements of troops and guns: Clausewitz says that in concentrating forces one should recognize that 'a distance of five miles means a six-hour span'.¹⁰

Then more information came in, as the British liaison officer Colonel Hardinge at Namur reported to Wellington at 10 p.m. that night – and his letter is full of the most significant information:

A report from General Ziethen of this day's date, *just received*, encloses a letter from General van Merlen of the Belgian army of this morning, in which he states that the troops collected at Maubeuge are in movement from thence on the road to Beaumont [i.e. eastward], being provided with eight days' provisions and forage.

⁸ There are two useful summaries of these reports: in Gen. von Lettow-Vorbeck, *Napoleons Untergang 1815*, (Berlin, 1904), Anlage 6, pp. 513–18 for 31 May onwards, which is used (with acknowledgements) by Lt-Col. W. H. James, *The Campaign of 1815* (London and Edinburgh, Blackwood, 1908), pp. 60–3 for 6 June onwards. Inevitably Lettow-Vorbeck relies heavily on *WD* and *WSD*. Gneissnau's written opinions come from Lettow-Vorbeck, *Untergang*, p. 192 and Anlage 6, and Wellington's remark from *WD*, 1838, XII, p. 462 (1852, VIII, p. 135); if Gneissnau was thus confident on 12 June, it can scarcely have been plain to him on that day that the sector round Charleroi would probably be the 'immediate victim' of 'an imminent attack'.

⁹ Pfuel's visit and the Duke's answer are in James, *Campaign*, pp. 118–9. The reserve Corps (Kleist) movements are mentioned in *PH 1815*, p. 155. Gneissnau's two messages on the 14th, timed "Mittag", are printed in Lettow-Vorbeck, *Untergang*, p. 196.

¹⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. M. Howard and P. Paret (Princeton, 1992) v, ch. 13, p. 328.

At the time General Ziethen wrote (*presumed to be at twelve or one today*) he had received no information of any movement of the enemy by their right. The fires of a body of troops, he reports, were seen last night in the direction of Thimmont, near Beaumont, and also in the vicinity of Mirbes [two villages about 5 miles from the Prussian outposts at Thuin]. There is nothing further said of the arrival of Buonaparte or of the Guards at Avesnes [only 22 miles due south of Wellington's forces at Mons, but about 31 miles southwest of Charleroi], which reports were received from the front during last night.

General Gneisnau credits the intelligence he has received from different quarters of the arrival of the two divisions of the [French] 4th corps from the neighbourhood of Thionville [on the Moselle] at Sédan and Mézières on the 12th.

The corps of General Kleist has been directed on Arlon [see my text above]. *In case of necessity* the 3rd corps from the environs of Cinay can be assembled at this point in fourteen hours; and the 4th corps from Liège is prepared to move upon Hanut. The *prevalent* opinion here seems to be that Buonaparte intends to commence offensive operations.¹¹

At 11.30 p.m. that night Gneisnau ordered II Corps to assemble some 8–10 miles west of Namur, and III Corps to concentrate just south of it; at midnight he sent his famous letter to Bülow of IV Corps, respectfully requesting him to concentrate at Hannut on the 15th as it was to be expected that the enemy would take the offensive forthwith, and confirming that headquarters would remain for the time being at Namur. As we know, Bülow did not realise (or would not accept) that this letter was an urgent demand for action, so he decided to move only very slowly to Hannut; his message to Namur to this effect arrived after headquarters had moved away, and Blücher's 'chaser' message of 11.30 a.m. on 15 June, sent to Hannut, had to be forwarded to Bülow, who was still at Liège.¹²

¹¹ WSD x, p. 476 (emphasis added). *PH 1815*, p. 157 omits the passage about Napoleon at Avesnes. Note particularly that Ziethen's message took some nine hours to cover 21 miles. The information of plans for the Prussian III and IV Corps 'in case of necessity' hardly suggests Prussian expectation of a full-scale dawn attack in overwhelming strength. Gneisnau seems to have concealed his intentions from Hardinge until Ziethen's late evening message, and to have sent no message of his own to Müffling or Wellington. Brussels therefore could not hear anything of Gneisnau's thinking until after daybreak, 15 June.

¹² Gneisnau's letters of 11.30 p.m. and midnight are in Lettow-Vorbeck, *Untergang*, pp. 197–8, and are summarized in James, *Campaign*, p. 65. Clearly Gneisnau did not intend to mislead Bülow, and the sequence of mishaps concerning the march of IV Corps and the messages sent between it and headquarters are some of the unlucky 'frictions' of war. Had Gneisnau written to Wellington from Sombrefe at 11.30 p.m. on 15 June in the words he then actually used to Knesebeck, the Duke would have read that 'IV Corps will go tomorrow as far as Gembloux', i.e. 5 miles E of Sombrefe, 20 miles W of Hannut and 40 from Liège (Gneisnau to Knesebeck in F. De Bas and J. T'Serclaes, *La Campagne de 1815* (Brussels, 1908) (hereafter DBTS), III, pp. 251–2). At dawn on the 16th, IV Corps was still at Liège! Let us remember this

Gneisau, as now he wrote his midnight request to Bülow 30 miles away, was right in predicting Napoleon intended to commence offensive operations: *there remained just 150 minutes in hand*. The French advance guard started its approach march at 2.30 a.m.¹³

Ziethen's 4.45 a.m. Message to Blücher, 15 June

Ziethen's I Corps was spread along a 30-mile cordon west and south of the Sambre from Binche in the west to Dinant in the Ardennes, guarding at least six bridges, yet with its reserve artillery 16 miles and its reserve cavalry 9 miles to the rear: dispersal during the quiet months was probably made necessary by considerations of food and forage, but it left Ziethen weak everywhere and rendered a prolonged defence extremely difficult. It is to his and his men's eternal credit that they checked Napoleon's attack as successfully as they did.¹⁴ On 15 June darkness began to end at about 2 a.m. and had given way to 'Civil Twilight' by 3 o'clock; sunrise was less than an hour later.¹⁵ Mr Hofschröder's recent article uses Ziethen's private 'journal' to give an account of events at his Charleroi HQ:

Expecting the French offensive to start at any time, he [Ziethen] went to bed fully clothed, and, on hearing the first sounds of the French offensive, sprang out of bed. He called his aides to him, sending Major Count Westphalen with the news to Blücher in Namur, just over 30 km away [by my reckoning 34 km, 21 miles¹⁶], and *Kolonnenjäger* Merinsky to Brussels, nearly 50 km distant [53 km, 33 miles], with a letter written in French that Ziethen had personally written to Wellington. These despatches left Charleroi at about 4.45 a.m.. Westphalen arrived in the Prussian headquarters before 8.30 a.m. Merinsky, travelling further, arrived in Wellington's head-

before denouncing as knowingly false Wellington's information given to Blücher on the 16th concerning his still widely dispersed Anglo-Allied army.

¹³ See *PHWH*, pp. 182–3. Clausewitz remarked: 'There is no doubt that the safety of the Prussian Army had been neglected; but in explanation one must say that all the arrangements had been made while the French were also still widely scattered in billets. The mistake lay simply in not changing the arrangements as soon as it was learned that the French were on the move and that Bonaparte himself was with them': *On War*, p. 329.

¹⁴ We are told that Ziethen's instructions said that 'as the bridges are made of stone and cannot be destroyed, and are not to be occupied with guns, their defence must be limited to a powerful line of skirmishers': James, *Campaign*, p. 56, citing *Militär Wochenblatt* (1846), p. 19.

¹⁵ I am most grateful to Dr David Harper of the Royal Greenwich Observatory for calculations on the timing of sunrise and set, twilight, dusk, darkness, moonrise and set (and the strength of moonlight) in Brussels and Belgium on these June days of 1815.

¹⁶ I have quoted distances given on 1960 road maps which pre-date the autoroute realignments of roads. I have assumed Westphalen rode by the shorter route to Namur via Keumiée and Spy. By Fleurus it would be almost 38 km, 23 miles, which would produce a higher m.p.h. speed but is harder to reconcile with Mr Hofschröder's stated distance of 'just over' 30 km.

quarters by 9 a.m.. While Blücher immediately ordered the concentration of the remainder of his army, Wellington appears to have kept the news to himself, or at least among his close associates. [Major General von] Müffling [Blücher's liaison officer with Wellington] does not appear to have been informed of its arrival.¹⁷

Ziethen's first message to Blücher is the one extant message that was provably sent at first onset. It is only 50 words long and reads in full:

*Since half-past four, guns and musket shots have been heard on the right flank. No report has yet come in. As soon as information is received I shall not fail to let Your Highness know. I am ordering the troops into their positions and if necessary shall concentrate at Fleurus [six miles north of Charleroi].*¹⁸

No text of a 4.45 a.m. message to Wellington (original or file copy) or statement by its messenger were ever produced, but by working from the extant message to Blücher we can begin to clear away uncertainty.

- (1) When was first contact made? The infantryman Captain von Gillhausen at the Lobbes outpost thought that the French attacked at "3.30 a.m.", while Mr Hofschroer (who quotes him) considers that the adjacent Thuin outpost (a little over a mile away) was not attacked until "about 4 a.m." These places were about 10 miles or so from Ziethen's HQ, too far for a messenger to travel in a few minutes, but the sound of cannon-fire or alarm guns might carry (although as we know, atmospheric played tricks with sound on that morning). Interestingly, Gillhausen, writing after the battle, made no mention of Prussian guns but referred to four French cannon opening fire on another outpost 'at about 4.30 a.m.'
- (2) What do we understand of Ziethen's timings? Expecting an attack, he immediately woke and wrote down 'half past four' as the first sound of alarm. This time was noted by Blücher in his acknowledgement. At noon on this day Blücher and Gneisau wrote to Müffling that the attack began at '4.30 a.m.'. All these timings are

¹⁷ *PHWH*, p. 185, relying upon Ziethen's 'journal', on DBTS I, p. 375 for the 8.30 arrival at Namur, and on the Duke's letter to Feltre for the 9 a.m. arrival in Brussels; but DBTS are making an assumption, not citing evidence, for they say that the 'report must have arrived [*dut arriver*] towards 8.30', whereas Blücher says 'I have just received' the message at 9 a.m.. The message could have taken no more than a minute to read and Blücher's reply no more than 10 to write.

¹⁸ Lettow-Vorbeck, *Untergang*, p. 252 and n., trans. in James, *Campaign*, p. 87 n (emphasis added). The former times the dispatch of this message as towards 5 a.m. but given that Ziethen was expecting action and would not have taken long to absorb the bare facts I think it difficult to time the dispatch later than 4.45 a.m. (in line with James): unlike Ziethen's second message, which gives place, time and date, this first message omits all three and suggests haste and little time for cool consideration. Lettow-Vorbeck claims that Ziethen repeated this message to the Duke in Brussels, but he cites no source for this and Ziethen does not mention sending the Duke any such message in this first report to his own C-in-C.

primary evidence. However, in his printed 'journal' written at an unspecified date and summarized in Hofschröder's account (quoted above), Ziethen said that he was woken by firing at '2 a.m.': Hofschröder rejects this as a possible editorial slip, 'perhaps a hand-written 2 being mistaken for a 5', but 5 a.m. does not fit either. Then again, in January 1819 Ziethen wrote to General Grolman that he sent his message to Brussels at '3.45 a.m.', a time that the Prussian authorities eventually had to reject. Mr Hofschröder himself considers that Ziethen sprang awake to firing 'at 4 a.m.' and (somewhat tardily) despatched a message about it to his Commander-in-Chief at some time after 4.30 a.m. From the primary statements I think it fair to say that 4.30 is the most certain time for first alarm in Charleroi, and that any messages would have gone a few minutes after that time.¹⁹

- (3) What reports did Ziethen provide? At the moment his first message was written. 'no report has yet come in'. No places are identified – there is no mention of 'Thuin' and 'the Sambre', names which are highlighted in the 'report' allegedly received by Wellington at '9 a.m.'. Understandably, all we have is a promise that 'as soon as information is received' he will send it. That next information was not sent to Blücher until another three-and-a-half hours had passed, which shows how slowly the vital information came in to Charleroi.
- (4) What aid did Ziethen call for? The troops were moving into position but no assistance was requested at this time.
- (5) Did Ziethen mention Wellington? In this one certain extant message neither the Duke nor Brussels is mentioned or hinted at. Could any message sent to Brussels at this time have conveyed more information than was given to Namur? And surely if a message was just about to go to Wellington it ought to have been mentioned to Blücher?
- (6) Can we discover messenger speeds? It is inconceivable that Ziethen should have treated the news of first contact as being of less than the utmost urgency. Although the messenger, Major Count Westphalen (as an aristocrat he presumably was well mounted), must have followed the principal route from I Corps to headquarters, and although it was daylight and too early for heavy traffic (and the other Corps were not yet encumbering this road), yet Blücher says that he had 'just received' the message at '9 a.m.'. The distance is about 21 miles (34 km) and the time taken about four hours (4.45 to 8.45 a.m.), which gives an average speed of 5.25 m.p.h. for this most urgent message. It is impossible to believe that it arrived at 8.15 or 8.30 a.m., for that would mean Blücher's

¹⁹ See *PH 1815*, pp. 170–1 (Gilhausen), 169 (Thuin '4 a.m.' and Ziethen's awakening), 193 (the '2 a.m.' and '5 a.m.' timings of the 'journal'), 188 (4.45 a.m. message); and *PHWH*, p. 185.

staff at Prussian headquarters mishandled it and criminally delayed giving the vital news to their own Commander-in-Chief.

We have already seen from Hardinge's letter of the previous night that Ziethen had sent Blücher some general intelligence which had taken some nine hours, thus averaging 2.3 m.p.h.; we shall see later messages to and from Namur moving at speeds of about 6 m.p.h.; we must dispense with formulaic or 'standard' speeds, rely upon the evidence of the documents in front of us, and accept that the speeds they clearly record were about the highest practicable long-distance speeds for Prussian messengers in the conditions of 1815.

The Trickle of Information to Namur

Immediately on receiving Ziethen's first message Blücher replied at 9 a.m.; he was still uncertain over precisely where the main French attack might fall:

I have just received Your Excellency's report of 4.30 a.m. concerning cannon and small arms fire. Overnight I had already given orders for II, III and IV Corps to concentrate, and indeed for II Corps to march towards Onoz and Mazy [west of Namur], III to Namur and IV to Hannut, and by this evening they should be in these localities. It is of the greatest importance that Your Excellency should observe exactly the enemy movements so as to identify the strength *and direction* of their columns. Also watch Binche and the Roman road [Ziethen had reported the gunfire as on his 'right flank' and Binche marked the western boundary of Blücher's forces]. Your Excellency should note in your reports the exact timing of their moves.²⁰

Ziethen had promised to send any further information as soon as received. His subordinate Steinmetz, who was positioned closer to the front, was able to clarify the situation in a message received in Charleroi a little before 8 a.m., for to him Ziethen replied at 8 a.m.:

I thank Your Excellency most deeply for the news [of the attack on Lobbes – note by Hofschröder]. Should the enemy push farther forward, then . . .

while to another subordinate, Pirch, Ziethen wrote at the same time:

As the enemy has taken possession of Thuin, and as it cannot yet be judged if he intends to cross the Sambre, or advance along its right bank, I request . . .²¹

²⁰ Gen von Ollech, *Geschichte des Feldzuges von 1815* (Berlin, 1876), p. 96 (emphasis added). Note that IV Corps was expected to cover 23 miles, III 17 miles and II about 10 miles in the day.

²¹ The messages to Steinmetz and Pirch are quoted fully in *PH 1815*, p. 171, and are timed there '8 a.m.'.

Now for the first time 'Thuin' and 'the Sambre' entered the reports of Ziethen. As promised, Ziethen immediately sent a second report to Blücher, timed 'HQ Charleroi, 8.15 a.m., 15 June 1815', and it fared rather better than the first, for it reached Namur at around 11.45 a.m. and represented a speed of 6 m.p.h. His report reads:

The enemy has already taken possession of *Thuin* and pushed back the advanced posts on this side to Montigny Leftigneis. He is also advancing on the left bank of *the Sambre*. He is too powerful to let himself be caught up in isolated combat and consequently 1 and 2 Brigades will have to be pulled back to the Gosselies-Gilly line. Napoleon himself is there with all his Guard so that one must assume serious intentions on his part against these places. Enemy cavalry is particularly noticeable. The troops who defended Thuin suffered many wounded.

I have informed the Duke of Wellington of this and entreated him to concentrate his troops without delay near Nivelles, which he would be willing to do according to information received yesterday from General Müffling.²²

At noon Blücher wrote to his wife:

At this moment I have received the report that Bonaparte has engaged my whole outposts. I break up at once and take the field against the enemy. I will accept battle with pleasure.²³

Thus it was almost noon before the splendid old man, a mere 21 miles away, knew enough concerning Napoleon's attack to decide upon his course of action. Ziethen's 8.15 message is doubly significant in that, *besides* the place-names, *for the first time this day he actually spoke about contacting Wellington*.

We next see an attempt to speed up the Prussian concentration. There is an anxious request for information as to Wellington's position in Gneisnau's phrases in the 'Blücher' letter to Müffling at around noon, the letter which the Prussian General Staff's archivist in 1847 characterized as *the second Prussian message* sent to Wellington that day, and the first from Namur. This letter said:

The enemy opened hostilities this morning at 4.30 a.m. [*sic*] and is advancing strongly along both banks of the Sambre. It is said that Bonaparte and the Guard are there, the latter certainly. General

²² Quoted in Lettow-Vorbeck, *Untergang*, p. 253; summarized in James, *Campaign*, p. 88, (emphasis added). Ziethen then added a postscript that from latest reports the French had not yet penetrated beyond Nalinne (a good 5 miles south of the Sambre at Charleroi). Note that this is the first occasion on 15 June 1815 when Ziethen mentions sending any message to Wellington, and that he does not say that it was sent 'at 4.30 a.m.', or 'at dawn', or 'some hours ago': from his wording it might have been written only a few minutes before 8.15 a.m. It might not even have started its journey.

²³ Blücher's letter to his wife in A. Uffindell, *The Eagle's Last Triumph* (London, 1994), p. 52 (emphasis added).

Ziethen has been ordered to watch the enemy closely and if possible not to retreat beyond Fleurus. The Army will concentrate tomorrow on the Sombreffe position *where the Prince intends to accept battle* ['wo der Fürst gesonnen ist, die Schlacht anzunehmen']. Overnight the three Army Corps received orders to concentrate today, II towards Onoz and Mazy, III at Namur, IV near Hannut. If necessary II Corps could even be at Sombreffe today and III at Onoz. In two hours time headquarters are moving to Sombreffe to which place I desire that you inform us as soon as possible *when and where* ['wann und wo'] the Duke of Wellington intends concentrating his forces and *what* ['was'] he has decided to do. It will be best to adapt the relay line [for courriers] via Genappe.²⁴

The Developments Seen from Brussels, June 1815

All through June Wellington had remained preoccupied by the the western sector, of the threat from Lille and Valenciennes: all his words are directed to that problem, with the Prussians considered as very much out to a flank. Anyone who studies his order of battle will instantly note that the trusted Hill had two British divisions placed well west of Brussels, at Ath and Audenarde, with a Netherlands division further north and Uxbridge's cavalry behind them, and that the principal Netherlands forces (with a British division on their western flank) were in central Belgium: as the Duke considered the Netherlands forces of uncertain loyalty and value, his placement of them shows his belief that they would not there take the brunt of any attack, and he also expected that the Prussians from the eastern flank could buttress the centre.

In Brussels the final days of waiting are well recorded. On the 13th Colonel Pfuël came from Prussian headquarters and been reassured by the Duke, but as Wellington was that same day telling his friend Lyndeoche that 'There is nothing new here' and that reports of Napoleon's arrival in northern France could be discounted, it is plain that the Duke considered the growing reports of activity as the usual rumour. However, the Duke was correct in this: that although his own force by itself was inferior in size to Napoleon's, *once united with Blücher* 'we are . . . too strong for him here'. Allied unity was of the essence.²⁵ Meanwhile the Duchess of Richmond's ball was the centre of interest.

We have seen that Ziethen in his second report to Blücher recorded

²⁴ Ollech, *Geschichte*, p. 99 and DBTS I, p. 418 (emphasis added). Note that despite being without any information from the Duke as to what he would do, Blücher had already made up his mind to fight at Sombreffe. Gneissau's Report on Operations remarked on Blücher 'ayant l'intention de donner une grande bataille à l'ennemie aussitôt qu'il lui serait possible' (in *WD*, 1852, VIII, app. XII, pp. 388–91).

²⁵ Pfuël's report is cited by James, *Campaign*, pp. 118–19; Wellington to Lyndeoche, Brussels, 13 June 1815, *WD*, 1838, XII, p. 462 (1852, VIII, p. 135).

that Müffling sent him assurances on the 14th that in case of attack on the Prussians Wellington would 'concentrate his troops without delay near Nivelles'. Müffling had conveyed a similar message in his letter to Gneisau or Grolman, dated 'Brussels, 15 June 1815' and received at Prussian headquarters that same day:

From General von Dörnberg's reports, a copy of one of which I enclose [that of 14 June concerning the massed concentration around Maubeuge and Beaumont, WSD, x, 477], the information from Lieutenant-General von Ziethen is confirmed.

The French newspapers of 12 June make it clear that Napoleon left Paris on the night 11/12 June, though where he has gone to is unknown.

As we were not attacked yesterday it seems that the enemy seeks to deceive us and masks his front the better to conceal his intended movements.

The King of France said yesterday to General Fagel who has arrived here that he had received reports of the resounding success of the royalists in the Vendée, who had taken Angers. However, Napoleon has sent his entire Young Guard thither so it is to be feared that the Vendée will be put down *before we can begin*.

It could possibly be that Napoleon wishes to heighten our level of attention here in order to gain time, perhaps to take up a better adapted position than his present one, namely in the Centre, with his main army in the region of St[e] Menehould [about 60 miles west of Metz], in order to attack us [i.e. the Prussians], the Austrians or the Russians.

The Anglo-Batavian Army is, according to the enclosed Order of Battle [not found], deployed in such a way that the flanking Corps of Lord Hill [II Corps, Ath, Audenarde, Sotteghem] and the Prince of Orange [I Corps, Braine-le-Comte, Enghien, Soignies, Nivelles, Roeulx], in positions from Enghien, Braine-le-Comte to Nivelles, can be concentrated in a very short time.

The Centre Corps – which more accurately should be called the Reserve – lies in and around Brussels and has 15 000 infantry and can move in any direction.

Should the enemy press forward between the sea and the Scheldt the army could go onto the offensive across the Scheldt at two points where bridgeheads have been made. If the enemy should press forward on the right bank of the Meuse, the Duke is ready either to cross the Meuse with us against the enemy, or (as I have proposed to him in certain circumstances) to go straight through the French fortifications into the enemy's rear.²⁶

²⁶ J von Pflugk-Harttung, *Vorgeschichte der Schlacht bei Belle-Alliance: Wellington* (Berlin, 1903), p. 47; Lettow-Vorbeck, *Untergang*, Anlage 7, p. 519, who notes the date of receipt; (emphasis added) *PHWH*, p. 184 quotes part of this letter ('The Anglo-Batavian Army . . . short time') to demonstrate Wellington's firm unconditional promise, but I think it essential to read it in full (as in *PH 1815*, p. 192) if one is to

Reading this letter in full we see that:

- (1) Müffling receives a mass of information himself, handles the material (Dörnberg's letter) and is in close contact with Ziethen. He is not being left in the dark.
- (2) He speaks in his own name, is thoroughly conversant with all intelligence reports²⁷ and offers his own opinions; he is no mere cipher.
- (3) He uses the Duke's name in one place only (and when writing to Blücher at 7 p.m. on the 15th Müffling is again careful to stipulate which are his opinions and which are the Duke's).
- (4) Müffling shows how various are the sectors from which attack might possibly come and how confusing the intelligence has proved to be; and his comment about threats to the right bank of the *Meuse* (Dinant, Namur, Huy, Liège) *either* demolishes his later recollection that 'the Allies had no apprehension of being assailed in the valley of the Meuse'²⁸ *or* means the Sambre (Thuin, Charleroi), but in that case is bad and confusing phraseology.
- (5) His letter makes it clear that *the future deployment of the Duke's army was obviously conditional on the direction of any actual attack*.
- (6) By this time Müffling had been working and observing at Wellington's headquarters for long enough to know where were the various cantonments; yet his letter contains *either* a gross – indeed unimaginable – blunder, *or* by poor phraseology obscures a distinction important in itself and which this trained staff officer would understand, for the letter appears to include 'Hill's Corps' between Enghien and Nivelles. Neither place was in Hill's area, and Hill's division nearest to Enghien was Clinton's at Ath, 13 miles to the west. It cannot be a blunder, for this is a letter from the future Chief of the Prussian General Staff 1821–9, a very senior staff officer at the head of a large team, who did not rely upon what he termed the 'ignorant and incapable' British staff for his information, who understood 'topography' and marching times. Müffling can only mean that those forces stationed 'from Enghien to Nivelles' could concentrate rapidly against an eastern threat, essentially 'Orange's Corps', for as an experienced officer he would have known that the western divisions at Ath, Audenarde and Sotteghem (the Scheldt sector) *were inevitably too far distant* to give the Prussians support 'in a very short time'.²⁹ This point is of relevance in considering the events of 16 June.

understand thinking in Brussels – and, perhaps as importantly, at the Prussian liaison office there. Müffling either forwarded an official order of battle or compiled one from his own personal knowledge.

²⁷ This is plain from the detailed analysis Müffling produced on 9 June: *WSD* x, p. 432.

²⁸ C. von Müffling, *Passages from My Life* (London, 1853), p. 232; the translation follows very closely the original *Aus meinem Leben* (Berlin, 1851), and has the same pagination.

²⁹ According to Hardinge's 14 June letter, Prussian headquarters expected their III Corps to take 14 hours to assemble and march the 17 miles from Ciney to Namur.

We see, therefore, that at the very moment when Ziethen found that the full weight of the French attack was pressing him back to the Sambre bridges, the chief Prussian liaison officer 33 miles away in Brussels was expressing his own continuing uncertainty as to French intentions, and this despite the previous day's messages from Ziethen and from Dörnberg. The relaxed atmosphere is undeniable; it permeates Brussels; it floods the liaison office. If Gneisnau had indeed been warning Brussels since 12 June that 'Napoleon was about to launch his offensive, and that its immediate victim was to be the Prussian positions in and around Charleroi',³⁰ then he had failed to convince Müffling.

Far from seeing inter-Allied agreement 'from 12 June onwards' on what the intelligence portended, we observe Gneisnau at first doubtful and only belatedly beginning to concentrate, and even then not telling Müffling so clearly. We see Brussels studying 'the sea to the Scheldt', the Vendée, Ste Meneshould, and the Meuse, and still thinking that the initiative (when 'we can begin') rests with the Allies. The Duke was wrong, but he was not alone in this, nor scheming against the Prussians.

The Prussian Charges against Wellington

In 1847 the head of the Prussian General Staff's archives, Major Gerwien, confirmed to Siborne that there were *two* messages sent to Brussels by the Prussians on 15 June 1815. His precise words are:

- (1). A message from General von Zieten in the first half of the day.
- (2). A message from Field-Marshal Prince Blücher in the second half of the day.

This is undoubtedly correct.³¹ But we are now concerned with establishing exactly when the first was sent to Brussels by Ziethen, and the trouble is that not only do Ziethen's two written messages to Blücher suggest that no real information was available before 8 a.m., but his later accounts are contradictory. The private journal is detailed but with obvious inaccuracies, and his letter in the General Staff's files is vague. The latter is quoted by Gerwien, who wrote:

The following is beyond doubt: that this report was sent from Charleroi at about 4 a.m. [*sic*] on 15th June and was delivered by a cour-

Stedman's division at Sotteghem was 17 miles NW of Enghien as the crow flies, and Colville's at Audenarde 22, and from Enghien to Nivelles is a further 15 miles.

³⁰ As is claimed in *PHWH*, pp. 182–3.

³¹ Gerwien's memorandum 13 Dec. 1847, BL Add. MS 34,708, fo. 271, col. a (my translation); the Prussian documents have been printed in an English translation by Mr Hofschröder in *Age of Napoleon XXV* (hereafter *AN25*): this passage is on p. 28, col. a, three-quarters down the page. Gerwien claims that these were the times of 'receipt', and justifies these times by citing (a) Wellington's letter to the Duc de Feltre (discussed below) and (b) an article in the *United Service Journal (USJ)* of June 1841, p.172 (but written in 1835) which I likewise quote later.

ier [*Feldjäger*] to the Duke of Wellington in Brussels. General von Zieten confirmed this in a letter (in our files) dated 21 January 1819 and sent to the late General von Grolman. The latter specifically requested this having already received the report 'verbally', learning at the same time that 'the courier in question (on 15 June) had arrived in Brussels at 9 a.m.'

No written copy of the message exists. General von Zieten excuses this when, in the above-mentioned letter to General von Grolman, he writes:

'As all correspondence with FM the Duke of Wellington had to be in French, and as in 1815 I had no officer who spoke French well enough to be capable of writing it well [*gut schreiben*], I had to conduct all the correspondence with FM the Duke of Wellington myself. That is why there is no copy in the files of the letter which I sent to Brussels at 3.45 a.m. [*sic*]³² on 15 June 1815 by a courier whose name escapes me [*entgallen ist*]. I am taking this opportunity to reply to your Excellency's letter of the 30th of last month.'

As one can see [wrote Gerwien], General von Zieten did not mention in this letter the time at which the courier arrived in Brussels, and it is not known whence General von Grolman got the information that 'the courier arrived in Brussels at 9 a.m.'³³

This is not exactly convincing evidence. From the evening of 16 June 1815 at latest the senior Prussian commanders had complained of Bülow's and Wellington's tardiness in marching to Blücher's assistance, so that the timing of Ziethen's message to the Duke and the 'delay' in his response must have been the subject of at least some inquiry; Grolman's acute interest in obtaining a written confirmation of something heard in conversation is evidence that the inquiry was ongoing. Yet to this all-important question Ziethen in 1819 sent a considered reply which was in most respects vague and unhelpful: and he never thereafter provided any further information which Gerwien might have found useful.

How different from that 1819 statement is Ziethen's own 'journal'. Now the story begins with gunfire at '2 a.m.' (not 3.45 as in the 1819 statement):

I sprang out of bed fully clothed, woke all officers, ordered Kolonnenjäger Merinsky, Kapitan von Felden, and Major Graf Westphal [*sic*] to ride to me immediately, *dictated* one letter in German, *one in French*, that hostilities had begun and sent Westphal with the first

³² This '3.45 a.m.' time of despatch was subsequently admitted by Gerwien (in answer to Siborne's criticisms) to be before the start of any fighting at all, so that he put forward a new time of despatch 'at around 5 a.m. (perhaps 4.45 a.m.)': memorandum of 29 Jan. 1848, BL Add. MS. 34,708, fos 284-7. That correction is at 284, col. b, 'Aus den, . . . in Brüssel einegetroffen sei' (AN25, p. 30, near the top of col. b).

³³ BL Add. MS 34,708, fo. 269, and AN25, p. 27, lower half of col. b.

to Namur to Field Marshal Blücher, Merinsky with the second to Brussels to the Duke of Wellington.³⁴

The recollected timings are all wrong. And contrary to Ziethen's statement to Grolman that he alone could write good French, there is now a soldier present capable of taking some 50 words' dictation in French – and therefore of making a copy in an office where preparations had been made for an early attack and the consequent despatching of messages – and it would not take long to make a file copy of so brief a note to an Allied field marshal. Whereas Ziethen was, for some reason, never able to supply the Prussian General Staff with the name of the messenger (and in this journal twice blundered over Westphalen's name), here is the messenger's name together with his humdrum function of 'supply train provost' (not *Feldjäger*). Comparing the 1819 letter and the 'journal' one is left with the feeling either that by 1819 Ziethen genuinely had forgotten many of the facts about this notorious puzzle and gave a somewhat evasive reply to the authorities, or that he chose not to disclose his 'journal' to them, or that his 'journal' was merely a recollection written in old age. Neither the 1819 statement nor the 'journal' is real evidence for a message to Brussels at 4.45 a.m.³⁵

To prove the arrival of Ziethen's message in Brussels Major Gerwien produced three *primary documents*, i.e. documents written on 15 June 1815: (i) Ziethen's 4.45 a.m. report that day to Blücher; (ii) Blücher's reply to Ziethen, sent at 9 a.m.; and (iii) the letter the Duke of Wellington sent to the French minister at the exiled Bourbon court, the Duc de Feltre, published in *Wellington's Despatches* in 1838. Of the three primary documents, two deal with the *despatch* and *receipt* of one message from Charleroi to Namur (not Brussels) and do not even mention Wellington, and it is only the third (the Duke's letter) that tells us anything about the *receipt* of the news in Brussels: *that is the one and only primary document in the Gerwien memorandum which gives this information.*

Gerwien's Primary Document: Wellington's Letter

The Duke's letter was written to Louis XVIII's minister at '10 p.m.' on the 15th and it contained a very specific phrase which provides a trace element for us in establishing when Ziethen's message was written and when it was received:

³⁴ Quoted in *PH 1815*, p. 170 from an article by D. Hafner on Ziethen in the periodical *Militärisches* (Leipzig, Jan. 1896), p.252 (emphasis added). In a later chapter (p. 193) Mr Hofschroer himself alludes to inaccuracies in the journal possibly due to its date of composition, but which may of course be due to Hafner's handling of the original MS.

³⁵ I have a high regard for Ziethen's fighting qualities. His later statements, however, do seem to be exercises in self-exculpation, with a considerable application of 'spin'.

Monsieur le Duc – Je reçois les nouvelles que l'ennemi attaqua les postes Prussiens ce matin à *Thuin sur la Sambre*, et il paraissait menacer Charleroi. Je n'ai rien reçu depuis neuf heures du matin de Charleroi.

J'ai écrit au Duc de Berri pour le prier de rassembler son monde à Alost, et je vous prie de faire rapport à Sa Majesté de cet événement; et d'avoir la bonté de lui conseiller de faire les préparatifs pour quitter Gand en cas que ce mouvement devient nécessaire. Je vous écrirai aussitôt que j'aurai encore des nouvelles.

J'ai l'honneur d'être, etc, Wellington³⁶

Now it has always been abundantly plain that Wellington's phrase 'Je n'ai rien reçu depuis neuf heures du matin de Charleroi' could be open to two interpretations, either as 'having no news from Charleroi since that *received* in Brussels at 9 a.m.', or as 'having received in Brussels no news from Charleroi since that *sent* at 9 a.m.'³⁷ The Prussian military archivist essentially conceded that the only *proof* of the time of arrival came from this *Wellington Despatches* Feltre letter. Thus Gerwien's argument is circular, for it is in order to decide on the correct interpretation of Wellington's letter that we need Ziethen's proofs, and the absence of any Prussian documentary or other proofs obliges the Prussian archivist to base his argument on the disputed interpretation of the Duke's letter. This point is not always understood. Gerwien wrote:

That General von Zieten's despatch to the Duke of Wellington arrived in Brussels at 9 a.m. is beyond doubt as the Duke himself sent a letter at 10 p.m. on 15th June to the Duc de Feltre.³⁸

That was all. We shall see from additional primary documentary evidence of 15 June, with corroboration from near contemporary sources, which interpretation of the letter is correct.

³⁶ 'I have received news that the enemy attacked the Prussian posts at Thuin on the Sambre this morning and appeared to menace Charleroi. I have received nothing since 9 o'clock in the morning from Charleroi. I have written to the Duc de Berri requesting him to assemble all his people at Alost [between Brussels and Ghent], and I request you to report the news to His Majesty, and to be so good as to advise him to make preparations for leaving Ghent should this become necessary. I shall write to you as soon as I have further news. I have the honour to be, etc.' *WD* (1838) XII, p. 473 (emphasis added) (the version in the 1852 edn, VIII, p. 143, has three tiny differences to these sentences – 'a attaqué' for 'attaqua', '9' instead of 'neuf', and 'devienne' for 'devient'). It is worth noting that in his *Waterloo Despatch* of 19 June 1815 the Duke also stated: 'I did not hear of these events till in the evening of the 15th' (*WD* 1838, XII, p. 478; 1852 VIII, p. 146).

³⁷ The Prussian General Staff believed that the first interpretation was the correct one and eventually persuaded Siborne of this. The American J. C. Ropes adopted the second: *The Campaign of Waterloo* (New York, 1892), p. 77 n.

³⁸ BL Add. MS 34,708, fo. 286, col. a; *AN25*, p. 31 col. a, para. 4. Gerwien also remarked that other Prussian military historians such as Damitz timed the arrival as '11 a.m.'

Brussels, 15 June: British and Dutch Evidence

We know that Wellington spent part of the 15th writing or dictating an 800-word letter to the Tsar; nothing in it indicates the approaching crisis, and it deals at length with the advance into France. At '1 p.m.' he wrote to Clinton, commanding the 2nd Division at Ath, on so minor a topic as the renumbering of British divisions: if he had known at 9 a.m. of the invasion he would have not wasted time on 'renumbering'.³⁹ At 3 p.m. Orange came to dinner prior to their both attending the Richmond ball, and with his royal status and as one of the Duke's immediate subordinates, as a commander already disturbed by the past weeks' intelligence, he would surely have asked for news (and from protocol could not have been denied an answer). He later made very frank comments about this day, but he never suggested either that the Duke pleaded ignorance of something or that he withheld information when they met at 3 p.m.

Orange's movements on the 15th played their part in delaying the receipt of news. At 5 a.m. he had ridden forward to within 5 miles of Binche, heard no firing, and apparently without telling his staff (since one of them, Sir George Berkeley, had expected him back before 2 p.m.) then gone straight to Brussels for his dinner. At 9.30 a.m. Dörnberg at Mons, some 10 miles from Binche, ended a report for forwarding via Orange's HQ to the Duke's Military Secretary (Fitzroy Somerset), with these words: 'I just hear the Prussians were attacked', so slowly had the news spread westward from the fighting, which had begun five hours earlier.⁴⁰ The Dutch governor of Mons, General Behr, similarly wrote (no time stated) to the Prince at Braine-le-Comte that the Prussians had been attacked. Behr's message reached the Prince's HQ, 15 miles from Mons, 'a few minutes before 12',⁴¹ but the

³⁹ *PH 1815* suggests (pp 157, 192, 194, 334, 354, 366) that Ziethen in Charleroi had sent Wellington an important warning message at midnight 14/15 June and that it reached Brussels at 7 a.m. (Most of such a journey would have been in daylight on unencumbered roads, and these times might serve as a gauge of riding speeds.) But such a message was never subsequently mentioned by the Prussians or by the Duke. Its existence depends entirely on a couple of sentences first written 12 years after the Duke's death in Gleig's popular *Life of Wellington*, (London, 1864), pp. 258–9. When analysed, the sentences' text and provenance do not support this theory of a midnight message. I hope to print elsewhere a detailed comment on this.

⁴⁰ *WSD*, x, p. 481. *PH 1815*, p. 195 likewise says that the Prussian news reached Mons at 9.30 a.m., but that it had reached the Netherlands commander van Merlen at St Symphorien (only 3 miles E of Mons) at 8 a.m.. In that case it travelled to Mons at 2 m.p.h.

⁴¹ Behr's untimed letter stated that he had received the news through van Merlen at St Symphorien (the man who apparently informed Dörnberg by 9.30). *PH 1815*, p. 196 n, says that 'DBTS, i, p. 388 give the time of [Behr's letter's] despatch', which they assume to have been at 10.30 a.m., a whole hour after Dörnberg sent his message from the same town. *PH 1815* overlooks DBTS's statement that Behr's message arrived in Braine before noon (as in my text), saying instead that it went straight to the Prince in Brussels (though Orange's whereabouts during the morning were not known and he was expected back in Braine around midday), and was received at '3 p.m.'. Hofschröder relies on a passage from the 73-year-old Wellington's 1842 Memorandum (*WSD* x, p. 524), which merely says: 'The first account received by the

Prince being absent it remained unread, until eventually opened by his Chief of Staff, de Constant Rebecque. The time these messengers took is a most telling commentary on the roads and the capacity of horses. A British officer attached to the Prince's staff, Berkeley, wrote to Somerset at 2 p.m., that Orange

having set out at 5 o'clock this morning for the advanced posts and not being returned, I forward the enclosed letter from General Dörnberg. General Constans [sic] desires I would inform you that the reports just arrived from different quarters state that the Prussians have been attacked upon their line in front of Charleroi; that they have evacuated Binche, and meant to collect first at Gosselies. Everything is quiet upon our front; and the 3rd division of the Netherlands is collected at Fay[t]. He [Constant] sends you also the copy of a letter from the commandant at Mons [Baron Behr].⁴²

Braine-le-Comte is 20 miles from Brussels. If a despatch rider departed a little after 2 p.m. carrying these messages to Fitzroy Somerset for delivery to the Prince and Wellington, and the evidence is plain that he did, the messages would have arrived during the afternoon dinner, at a time around, say, 4.30 to 5 p.m. on the 15th.

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Lady De Lancey's evidence is of particular value as to the period of the day, if not the exact hour, at which Sir William's chief assistants were alerted. She had married Sir William in Scotland on 4 April 1815, only to see him depart for Brussels as Deputy Quarter Master General

a little alarm in the evening with some public [news]papers, and Sir William went out with them but returned in a short time; and it passed so completely, that Thursday forenoon [15th] was the happiest day of my life . . . Sir William was to dine at the Spanish Ambassador's [Alava], the first invitation he had accepted from the time I went . . . Near six, I fastened all his medals and crosses on his coat, helped him to put it on, and he went . . . When I had remained at the window nearly an hour, I saw an aide-de-camp ride under the gateway of our house. He sent to enquire where Sir William was dining . . . A few minutes after, I saw Sir William on the same horse gallop past to the Duke's, which was a few doors beyond ours. He dismounted and *ran into the house – left the horse in the middle of the street . . . About nine, Sir William came in . . . He said he should be writing all night, perhaps . . . He went to the office, and returned near twelve*, much fatigued, but did not attempt to sleep; he went twice to the Duke's; the first time he found him standing looking over a map with a Prussian general, who was in full dress uniform – with orders and crosses etc. – the Duke was in his chemise and slippers, preparing to dress for the Duchess of Richmond's Ball . . . About two, Sir William went again to the Duke, and he was sleeping sound.⁴⁴

This is exceptionally strong evidence for the news coming well into the late afternoon on the 15th and, incidentally, shows Müffling later that night hearing what information the Deputy Quarter Master General possessed and what orders the Duke gave him.

There is some other evidence as to the time when the news reached Brussels and the troops alerted. Colonel Sir A. S. Frazer, commanding the Royal Horse Artillery, wrote from Brussels at '10 p.m' on 15 June 1815:

I have this moment returned from dining . . . at Lenniche St Quentin [about midway between Brussels and Ninove] . . . On returning I find Ross here, he has dined at General Kempt's [commanding 8th Brigade, 5th Division, Brussels] and has learned in the course of the evening that the enemy has moved upon Mons, and that in consequence we are to move during the night . . .⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Lady De Lancey, *A Week at Waterloo in 1815*, ed. Maj. B. R. Ward (London, 1906), pp. 40–46. An abridged narrative, intended for circulation to non-family readers, quoted at the end of the book, says: 'On Thursday the 15th June we had spent a particularly happy morning. My dear husband gave me many interesting anecdotes of his former life' (p. 103). The narrative is initialled 'M. De L.'; her second marriage, to Capt. Hervey, is recorded in *Gentleman's Magazine*, LXXXIX, pt 1 (1819), p. 368; she died in 1822. Her timing of the sudden rush as around 6.45 p.m. may be slightly 'out': full June daylight may have caused this slip, as sunset in Brussels on 15 June was at 8.17 p.m. (Dr Harper's information).

⁴⁵ *Letters of Colonel Sir Augustus Simon Frazer*, ed. Maj.-Gen. E. Sabine (London, 1859), letter 19, pp. 533–6. Frazer (1776–1835) was a Peninsular veteran.

There is the testimony of Lord Uxbridge's ADC, Captain Thomas Wildman, 7th Hussars, written on 19 June 1815:

On Thursday the 15th we rode over from Ninove [14 miles] to Brussels to a ball at the Duchess of Richmond's and were just dressed when news arrived that the Prussians had been attacked in the morning . . . We went to the ball, where the Duke of Wellington and Lord Uxbridge had a long conversation, after which we mounted and rode back to Ninove. From there orders were sent to assemble the whole of the cavalry and Royal Horse Artillery near Enghien.⁴⁶

Major-General Sir Hussey Vivian, commanding 6th Cavalry Brigade, wrote in 1839:

On the 15th I went to Brussels and dined with Lord Anglesey [the title Uxbridge took on being created Marquess after Waterloo]. After dinner [Rear Admiral] Sir Pult[e]ney Malcolm came to us from the Duke, where he had dined, and said the French had advanced . . .⁴⁷

There is the anonymous officer of Picton's 5th Division. His recollections, first scribbled a few days after the battle and expanded in 1835, should be treated with caution as to the precise times, but the general account is supportive:

About three o'clock on the afternoon of that day [15 June], our officers were sitting at dinner at the Hotel de Tirlemont [in Brussels], where we had our mess, when we heard a commotion, or greater stir than usual, having arisen in the city; presently some Belgian gentlemen came in and told us, that there had been 'an affair of posts' on the frontier, and that the French suffered a repulse . . . After dinner we strolled, as was our custom in the afternoon, into the park, where the great world promenaded every evening. Towards six o'clock, sauntering about the walks, I encountered two Prussian aides-de-camp, who had come from Blücher with intelligence of the advance of the French army, pointing towards Brussels, or in that direction; we were instantly ordered to hold ourselves in readiness to march to the front in the morning. About seven o'clock the orderlies were seen flying about with their books,

⁴⁶ Wildman to his mother, 19 June 1815, quoted in *The Listener* LI (24 June 1954), pp. 1085–7. It is impossible to believe that if the Duke knew of the attack by 9 a.m. he would keep Uxbridge, his second-in-command, in ignorance until the evening.

⁴⁷ Vivian (1775–1842) to Siborne, 3 June 1839, *Waterloo Letters*, ed. H. T. Siborne (London, 1891), no. 71, p. 151; he added: 'I think he said the French had taken Charleroi', but the town only fell at 11 on that morning. Not one letter in *Waterloo Letters* suggests a morning time for the receipt of the news of the French attack.

that their might be 'no mistake', each in search of his officer, to show him the orders.⁴⁸

There is Major Basil Jackson's more distant recollection in a letter of 26 June 1841 in the following terms:

regarding the time when the offensive movements of the enemy became known to the Duke of Wellington. I was walking in the park at Brussels about six o'clock in the evening [of the 15th] with the late Colonel Robert Torrens, when an orderly of the Guards came up, and said that our presence was required at the Quartermaster General's office; on reaching which, we found Sir William De Lancey, who held in his hand a memorandum by the Duke, directing the movements of the several divisions of his army from their cantonments. We were occupied, with other staff-officers, during two hours in writing and despatching orders for moving . . .⁴⁹

Unfortunately General Sir George Scovell's recollection is weakened by great age and distant memory, and his first date (13 June) cannot be reconciled with the military situation on the night of 12/13 June nor with Lady De Lancey's near-contemporary testimony; his recollection of the 15th relied heavily upon a biography of the Duke. Scovell wrote:

On the 13th [*sic*] June I went about 6 o'clock A.M. to his [De Lancey's] office for some Papers I wanted and to my astonishment found him writing – he told me he had been employed all the night preparing the Duke's orders for all Divisions to move to a certain point but that these orders were not to be sent off before Napoleon had committed himself to a certain line of operations – on the 15th [*sic*] about 3 o'clock P.M. there no longer remained any doubt on the subject and the orders as detailed in the work of Mons. Brialmont, translated by the Rev G R Gleig at page 400 Vol the 2nd, were dispatched. [vol. II, p. 400: 'Wellington sent his first orders . . . about five in the evening']⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *USJ* (June 1841), pt 2, pp. 170–203, dated '1835', from memoranda written at Bayav on 21 or 22 June 1815 (p. 170). The passage is on p. 172. This seems to be Hofschröder's main source for timing Blücher's messenger reaching the Duke 'at 5 p.m.'. The unknown author added that the 5th Division had paraded 'almost every other day', with baggage packed, 'as if going into the field' (p. 172).

⁴⁹ Lt-Col. Basil Jackson (1795–1889), *USJ* (Aug. 1841), pp. 541–2. *PHWH*, p. 185 n., seeks to show that the Duke was informed before dinner of the French attack by citing Jackson's *Notes and Reminiscences of a Staff Officer*, ed. R. C. Seaton (London, 1903) (written and privately printed 1877), p. 12: 'early on the 15th of June 1815 we learned that the French were crossing the frontier.' The aged Jackson added that 'in the evening, about seven o'clock' he was sent for to copy orders. Neither text is contemporary evidence fit to stand alone, and both must be treated as merely auxiliary testimony, but 1841 is better than 1877.

⁵⁰ PRO WO 37/12, Gen. Sir George Scovell's papers, cited by *PHWH*, p. 185 n. as 'indicating that the news was circulating within Wellington's headquarters in Brussels before 3 p.m.'. The aged Scovell (1774–1861) wrote this undated statement of 8 pp., headed 'Waterloo', in or after 1858, when Brialmont/Gleig's second volume was published *History of the Life of Arthur Duke of Wellington trans. from the French of M.*

Brussels, 15 June: German Evidence

Luckily there are three Germans who wrote letters on 15 June which throw a great deal of light on the sequence of reports, including Ziethen's famous message. First, we have seen (pp. 98–9 above) that Gneisnau wrote in Blücher's name to Müffling at around noon from Namur, 40 miles from Brussels, and we can establish how swiftly this urgent inquiry travelled from something that Müffling wrote later in the day. Gneisnau summarized the information in Ziethen's 8.15 a.m. message, but it is significant that he did not mention 'Thuin': any mention of that place in messages to Brussels did not come via Blücher or Gneisnau.

Then there is Müffling in the liaison office in Brussels. His letter of this day's date is invaluable as the third item and we shall see it shortly; but, as a prelude to the second item, we must sort out the confusion created by Müffling's memoirs written long after the event, where he says:

When General von Zieten was attacked before Charleroi ['vor Charleroy angegriffen'] on the 15th of June, an event which opened the war, he despatched an officer to me [Müffling], who arrived at Brussels at three o'clock ['um 3 Uhr in Brüssel eintraf'].

Armed with this news of the attack, Müffling said that he went to the Duke 'immediately' ['sofort mittheilte'].⁵¹ This has become a standard element in the story of 15 June, and yet it seems to me that it is wrong in important respects because the ageing Müffling's memory played him false. We can see this by comparing it with a letter from a Würtemberger General, Ernst von Hügel, stationed in Brussels, who wrote a letter to his King, timed '6 p.m.' on the 15th, our second piece of evidence, mentioning information just received from Ziethen's own

Brialmont, with Emendations and Additions by Rev. G. R. Gleig (London, 1858). The PRO has three copies: (i) the original in a spidery ink script on quality foolscap, (ii) a copy on blue foolscap in a mid-Victorian hand, and (iii) a printed copy, marked for private circulation only. On p. 1 there are two dates, 13 and 15 June, and these are copied correctly in versions (ii) and (iii); although the spidery writing and faded ink makes identification difficult at first glance, when a pocket magnifying-glass is used the difference between the '13' and the '15' is unmistakable. In any case the text clearly draws such a distinction. The quotation is from pp. 1 and 2. Scovell was relying for his information about the 15th upon the Brialmont/Gleig volume, where (II, p. 399) it is *explicitly denied* 'that the English general was aware at nine in the morning of the attack on the Prussian posts at Thuin and Lobbes The first intelligence of the attack of the French was communicated to Wellington at three o'clock in the afternoon, by the Prince of Orange.'

⁵¹ Müffling, *Passages*, p. 228. *PHWH*, p. 186 relies upon this passage from Müffling in claiming that Ziethen sent a report at 11 a.m. of the 'fall' of Charleroi, and that it was received by Müffling at 3 p.m. But Müffling says merely that it was news of the attack on Charleroi, not of its fall – and he gives no time of despatch.

hussar messenger and Ziethen's 'report'. In this letter to the King of Württemberg he wrote:

At this moment ['In diesem Augenblick', i.e. just a moment ago] a Prussian hussar rides in to General Müffling, who lives close to me, and brings him the news which Müffling at once imparts to me, that in the forenoon ['dass heute vormittag'] Napoleon had attacked the Prussian Army on the Sambre near Thuin ['an der Sambre bei Thuin']. *Result not yet known*. Müffling has just come back from the Duke. The Crown Prince of the Netherlands [then with the Duke] had reported that on our [the Anglo-Allied] left flank a considerable cannonade is heard. Wellington at once ordered all his Corps to march through the whole night and concentrate ['befahl sofort allen Corps, die ganze Nacht zu marschieren, um sich zu konzentrieren']. Müffling allowed me to read Ziethen's report: in the face of considerable enemy superiority he must withdraw his advanced posts towards Fleurus. By the evening of 17 June [i.e. in another 48 hours] it will probably be decided whether the campaign has opened favourably or unfavourably for the Allies. What I can relate with certainty to Your Majesty is that the best understanding ['das beste Einvernehmen'] exists between the Duke of Wellington and Prince Blücher, and both act together in total agreement.⁵²

This is a remarkable document, written by someone who had not accompanied Müffling to the Duke's house and so could not have been influenced by anything said there.

- (1) Although the outcome of the battle at Charleroi was known at the front by 11 a.m. at latest, *seven hours later* it was still not known in Brussels. This helps to confirm probable courier speeds for this day.
- (2) The outcome was likewise unknown to the hussar bringing Ziethen's report, which means that he certainly started his ride before 11 a.m.
- (3) If an earlier Prussian courier had reached Brussels with news of fighting, had given his message to someone, and that message had been concealed from Müffling, the hussar now with Müffling would have been astonished by the placid inertia or plain ignorance in Brussels. Yet neither Müffling nor Hügel gives the slightest indication of anything amiss.
- (4) As in Ziethen's 8.15 message, the letter indicates the presence of 'Napoleon' and refers to real fighting. Outpost bickering would not be described in such terms. It corresponds, therefore, with Ziethen's second message to Blücher and not with his 4.45 one.
- (5) Ziethen's report now received uses virtually the same phrase, 'on

⁵² Hügel is quoted in Maj. Gen. A. Pfister, *Aus Dem Lager der Verbündeten, 1814 und 1815* (Stuttgart, 1897), p. 366 (emphasis added). Part of this letter is quoted in James, *Campaign*, p. 91 n.

- the Sambre near Thuin', that the Duke will adopt at 10 p.m. for his letter to Feltre ('à Thuin sur la Sambre'). No other extant report addressed to Brussels on that day uses that phrase about 'Thuin'.
- (6) There *is* one other document written on 15 June which refers to the French having taken Thuin – but it was sent *to Namur*; it is Ziethen's second report to Blücher. Ziethen himself had only learnt at 8 a.m. of the fighting at Thuin. It is also in Ziethen's 8.15 a.m. report that he first speaks of sending a message to Wellington.
 - (7) Müffling quoted 'forenoon' in Ziethen's message, not 'daybreak' or '4.30 a.m.', for the start of the attack. Hügel repeated this after reading Ziethen's actual message. By 8 a.m. it had been *full day* for many long hours in the minds of hard-pressed defenders.
 - (8) Had the hussar started at 4.45 a.m. (and therefore without news of Thuin) his journey must have taken over a dozen hours for 33 miles, or something under an average 2.75 m.p.h., less than the speed of one of Ziethen's messengers to Namur the day before. Had he started in mid-morning taking over seven hours to ride the gruelling 33 miles he would have averaged something under 4.5 m.p.h., compared to Westphalen's 5.25 m.p.h. for 21 miles (i.e. two-thirds the distance to Brussels). From this it is reasonable to suggest that the hussar started, not at dawn or 4.45 a.m., but at a mid-morning time. He was the messenger referred to in Ziethen's second message to Blücher, but the message departed after 8.15 a.m..
 - (9) It is plain that Müffling did not go to the Duke at 3 p.m. but a little before 6 in the evening, *and found the Prince of Orange there*⁵⁸.
 - (10) We know that the Prince had heard no gunfire in the morning, yet he now spoke of heavy cannon-fire having been heard. This information must have come via the despatch rider sent from Braine-le-Comte at 2 p.m.. The first news had come to Wellington's headquarters through the Dutch–Hanoverian conduit.
 - (11) By 6 p.m, when Hügel wrote, the Duke had already written his First Orders.
 - (12) At 6 p.m. Gneisnau's informative noon letter from Namur had still not reached Müffling.

Though we should not place too much reliance on Müffling's memoirs, they do indeed confirm the last two points above, for he wrote there that Wellington's First Orders 'were accordingly despatched about six or seven o'clock. Later in the same day intelligence of the commencement of hostilities, forwarded from Charleroi to Namur, reached me a second time from thence. The Field-Marshal

⁵⁸ *PHWH*, p. 186 says: 'Dinner was interrupted by the Prince of Orange and Müffling bursting in with his news.'

informed me of his concentrating at Sombref.⁵⁴ But we have conclusive *primary* evidence in the letter that Müffling himself wrote to Blücher at '7 p.m., 15 June 1815', the opening sentences of which are relevant to this discussion.⁵⁵ It gives the Prussian Commander-in-Chief important news just received from Ziethen:

The news has just arrived ['so eben trifft hier'] that Lieutenant-General von Ziethen has been attacked. The Duke of Wellington has ordered all his troops to concentrate and the Prince of Orange is to report to him if enemy columns are marching on Nivelles, because either the enemy forces are going along the Sambre in order to join with columns advancing from Givet [on the Meuse], or will attack Fleurus in which case it is probable that he will attack Nivelles . . .

What we have here is confirmation of several vital points:

- (1) Müffling at 7 p.m. writes to his own Commander-in-Chief informing him that 'Ziethen has been attacked', and treats it as new and important information which Blücher needs to know. Therefore Gneisau's letter had not yet come – its courier thus taking over seven hours to cover 40 miles (i.e. averaging less than 5.5 m.p.h.). This disproves the claim sometimes made that 'Blücher's message' (i.e. Gneisau's noon letter) came at 5 p.m.⁵⁶
- (2) Müffling's recollection of a '3 p.m.' visit by an officer from Ziethen with vital news must be wrong, for would not Müffling have written to his own Commander-in-Chief with that startling news before 7 p.m.?
- (3) Müffling agrees with Hügel that the incoming report is of an attack on Charleroi, not of its loss, nor of a mere 'alarm' in the outposts at 4.30 a.m.
- (4) Müffling nowhere implies that this message was slow in arriving from Charleroi, nor speaks of any previous messenger, nor of any message having gone astray. The time of arrival does not surprise this trained staff officer.
- (5) Müffling confirms that the Duke had issued his orders before hearing from Blücher.

We have been studying primary documents written by Ziethen, Blücher, Gneisau, Hügel and Müffling on 15 June 1815, as well as

⁵⁴ Müffling, *Passages*, p. 229. The original German reads: 'Die Befehle dazu um 6–7 Uhr expediert. Später ging dieselbe Nachricht von der Trüffnung der Feindseligkeiten, welch Charleroy nach Namur gegangen war, von vort zum zweiten Male bei mir ein. Der Feldmarschall benachrichtigte mich von seiner Concentrirung bei Sombref (*Aus meinem Leben*, p. 229).

⁵⁵ Quoted in H. Delbrück, *Das Leben des FM Grafen von Gneisau* IV, (Berlin, 1880), p. 365 n.; and *PH 1815*, p. 212, but where the news is assumed to come from Berkeley at Braine-le-Comte, as Hofschröder nowhere mentions Pfister or Hügel.

⁵⁶ This message [from Blücher] reached Brussels at about 5 p.m. Wellington still did not react: *PHWH*, p. 187.

messages sent on that day by Dörnberg, Behr and Berkeley. I have relied as little as possible upon material written even a short while after the event, though I would contend that such material does not weaken my case but supports it. I have forborne from quoting the Duke's subsequent commentaries on this campaign so as to let the contemporary record stand alone, but there is this much general corroboration – albeit with various errors excusable in a man of 82 looking back 36 years – in his letter to Ellesmere of 25 September 1851 about Müffling's memoirs:

The first I heard of the attack upon Ziethen was not from Müffling! It was from the Prince of Orange, who had come in from his quarters at Braine-le-Comte [Ellesmere found the Duke's writing almost illegible here], and who informed me that the French were in movement, that they had felt his posts, and had attacked Ziethen! I immediately sent orders for the concentration of our troops towards the left, and for the reserve to collect in the Park as soon as possible. Müffling did not come in with his account till dinner! Certainly the first news that I received of a movement by the French, and particularly of the advance against Ziethen's posts, was from the Prince of Orange in person.⁵⁷

We can agree with the Prussian case that Ziethen sent one message to Brussels in the morning and that Blücher (via Gneisnau) sent one in the afternoon, but the evidence for their times of arrival does not support Gerwien's case. Through the documents written on the day and their stated times we have seen the despatch of messengers from Charleroi to Namur, from Namur to Brussels, from Mons to Braine-le-Comte and thence to Brussels – and how long it took for those messengers to travel.

We have seen that Ziethen's messenger is recorded as reaching Brussels a little before 6 p.m. by an independent Württemberger writing at 6 p.m. and the essence of his news confirmed by the Prussian Müffling writing only an hour later. We see that the information brought was of the situation at Thuin, on the Sambre, and at Charleroi *after* Napoleon had begun to disclose his hand but *before* the town fell at 11 a.m.. The distance was 33 miles, a truly punishing distance for a horse, and we should not be surprised – knowing as we do the other riders' speeds over long distances – if the messenger took seven or more hours to cover it.

For what is the alternative? A rider whom nobody saw, leaving Char-

⁵⁷ *Personal Reminiscences of the Duke of Wellington by Francis Earl of Ellesmere*, ed. Lady Stafford (London, 1903), p. 185. In quoting part of this *PHWH*, p. 201, says that it was merely 'a conversation . . . hearsay evidence apparently originating from an unreliable witness [Wellington], and it would be wrong to place any credibility on the content of a fireside chat between old friends'; but Ellesmere stated (p. 188) that the communication was indeed a letter from the Duke, headed 'Walmer'. The original letter is in the Wellington Papers at Southampton, WP 2/169/98 and 99.

leroi before there was any firm information to give the Duke, but apparently reporting attacks on Thuin which his own commander did not know of until 8 a.m., a rider apparently capable of accomplishing the journey in $4\frac{1}{4}$ hours so as to arrive at '9 a.m.', who thus travelled at a speed approaching an average 7.75 m.p.h.. *That speed is an incredible 50% faster than Westphalen attained for his own most urgent message.* Nor is that all. He was a man whom nobody saw afterwards, whose morning achievement and exhausted horse's needs were not noted or seen to at his own country's liaison office. Such a ride would have been famous: and it would have been the subject of searching inquiry among the Prussians when they grumbled at Wellington's 'tardy' response (as they did from 16 June onwards). Yet when pressed to state the facts in writing less than four years after this notorious event Ziethen could not remember his messenger's name. It is scarcely a convincing case to put against the contemporary evidence I have cited.⁵⁸

Judged on the primary evidence, I maintain that the Duke first heard of the invasion through the Dutch–Hanoverian conduit while entertaining Orange to dinner, probably around 4.45 to 5 p.m., and heard only later from Müffling of Ziethen's Charleroi report, which represented the state of battle there at about 9 in the morning. The letter he wrote to Feltre that night should be read as meaning 'I have received no news from Charleroi since that despatched at 9 o'clock this morning'. He did not delay in issuing his First Orders.

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⁵⁸ If there really was an unaccountable delay over Ziethen's famous message, what explanation did he receive ('reasons in writing') from the hussar? Who signed for the letter? Was some answer given? Why was not a report made on the incident? Did nobody ask, until Grolman put his questions at the end of 1818?