

Chapter I

On the Road to the River Dwina

On June 24th, 1812, more than 400.000 men are present on the banks of the river Niemen because of the decision of Emperor Napoleon to invade the Russia of Czar Alexander. Napoleon arranged his tremendous force in four different points along the river, between Tilsit on the north and Grodno on the south. The second corps under Oudinot was with Napoleon himself in Kowno.

On the morning of June 24, there is here, in Kowno, 200.000 men present under arms, enthusiastic for most of them and having no doubt for the upcoming victory.

Nearly 200.000 other men will cross the Niemen here, until mid-November; but only some thousands of survivors will be able to cross again in December.

The present troops will hear this proclamation of Napoleon before crossing the river: "Soldiers! The second Polish war has begun; the first ended at Friedland and Tilsit. At Tilsit, Russia swore an eternal alliance with France and war with Britain. Today she has violated these oaths! She refuses to give any explanation of her strange conduct, except on condition that the eagles of France repass the Rhine, leaving, by such a movement, our allies at her mercy. Russia is



Nicolas-Charles Oudinot, Duke of Reggio (1767-1847)

(Robert Lefèvre, Palace of Versailles)

He was made Marshal on the battlefield of Wagram. Probably a mediocre strategist, he was, however, an exceptionally brave and intrepid general officer, and the marshal who suffered the most injuries: 16 times at least!

Volunteer in 1784, dismissed by grace in 1787, he returned to service like captain in 1789. In 1795 he was general de brigade, general de division in 1799.

At the head of the "division des grenadiers réunis d'Oudinot", an elite division formed with grenadiers and carabineers, he was noticed during the campaigns of 1805 and 1809.

But his behavior at the head of an independent force during the Saxony campaign in 1813, will confirm his lack of resolution already evident in 1812 before and during the first battle of Polotsk.

dragged along by a fate. Her destinies must be accomplished. Shall she then consider us degenerate? Are we no longer to be looked upon as the soldiers of Austerlitz? She offers us the alternative of dishonour or war. The choice should not be in doubt. Let us then march forward. Let us pass the Niemen. Let us carry the war into her territory. The second war of Poland will be as glorious to the French arms as was the first; but the peace which we shall conclude will be its own guaranty and will put an end to the fateful influence which Russia has for fifty years exercised over the affairs of Europe.”

Marbot, colonel of the 23rd chasseurs à cheval regiment, kept of this day, an unforgettable memory: “When the sun rose on June 24, we witnessed a most imposing spectacle. On the highest point near the left bank were seen the Emperor's tents. Around them, the slopes of every hill and the valleys between, were lined with men and horses flashing with arms. This mass of 250,000 combatants was rolling on in three huge columns with the most perfect regularity towards the three bridges which crossed the river, and



**General-Lieutenant Count Wittgenstein
(1768-1843)**

(G. Dawe, Military Gallery of the Winter Palace, St. Petersburg)

« General Wittgenstein was a man of some forty years. Full of good will, with an enterprising, adventurous spirit. Only his judgment was not unfaillingly clear, and his energy sometimes flagged. » (C. von Clausewitz)

« Wittgenstein had successfully covered St. Petersburg, which, in addition to the rewards received from the Emperor, brought him much flattering praise from the capital and further enhanced the nimbus of glory that already surrounded him. There was indeed every reason to be satisfied with General Wittgenstein 'operations. In spirit and morale, he had always shown himself equal, and often superior, to his opponent; he had carried out his mission; in this theatre the French had completely failed, not merely because of circumstances, but because of the performance of Russian arm. » (ibid, historical and political writings)

At the death of Kutuzv in 1813 April, he became the General-in-chief of the Russian Army and command the Russo-prussian Army. He was made responsible by the Prussians for the defeat of Bautzen and was replaced by Barclay-de-Tolly. He then commanded three Russian army corps, including one of cavalry, during the remainder of the Saxon campaign.

over which the various corps were proceeding to the right bank, each to advance in the direction prescribed to it.”

As soon as the river was crossed, the 200,000 men under the direct orders of Napoleon, made one's way towards Vilna, pushing before them the forces of the 1st Russian army of Barclay-de-Tolly.

Napoleon entrusted to the 2nd Corps of Oudinot, the guard of the rear and left wing of the Grande Armée. Here, he was opposed against the 1st Russian Corps of Wittgenstein, who was placed at the right of the Russian defence system.

At the same time, Oudinot had to get in contact with Macdonald, who had crossed the Niemen in Tilsit, at about 80 miles downstream as the crow flies.

Learning that Wittgenstein was at Wilkomir, Oudinot decided to push Wittgenstein from this town. On June 26, his headquarters was at Janovo. On 28, a skirmish action took place at about four miles before Wilkomir between the division Verdier, supported by light cavalry brigade Castex, and the rear-guard of Wittgenstein (GM Kulniev with the 23rd and 24th Jager Regiments, 4 squadrons of the Grodno Hussar Regiment, 3 sotnias of the Platov #4 Cossack Don Regiment and 6 canons of the Light Battery #27).

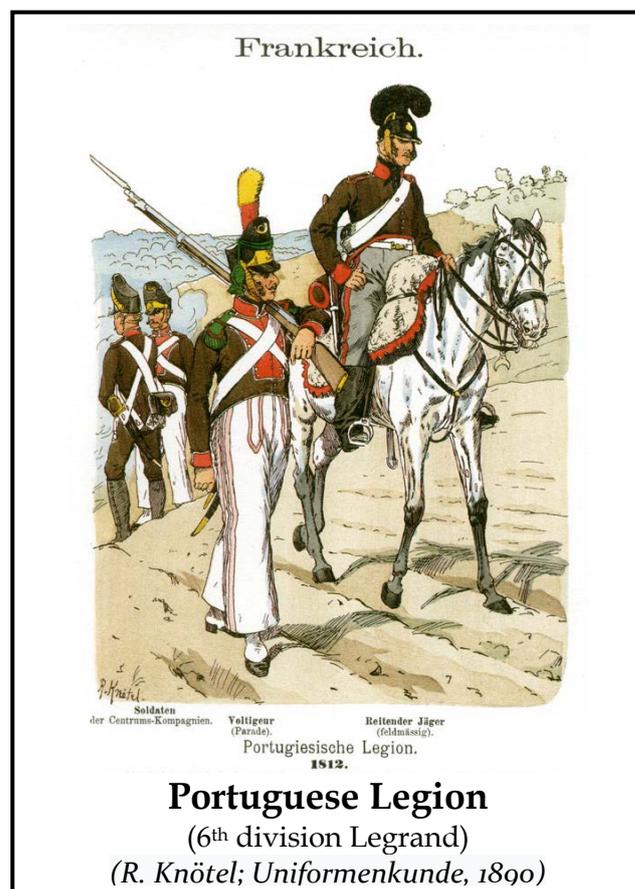
Oudinot writes he made 250 Russian prisoners and lost only 50 men. It seems that the 23rd Chasseurs à cheval behaved brilliantly in this action.

Russians said they lost 60 killed and 32 wounded, and French had at least three times more losses and about 20 prisoners.

This skirmish action was the first engagement between the two generals in this secondary sector of the campaign.

At this time, Wittgenstein had about 25,000 men and Oudinot, 40,000. The French Marshal command the 2nd corps of the Grande Armée with three infantry divisions: the 6th under command of Legrand, the 8th under Verdier and the 9th under Merle; two light cavalry brigades, the 5th Castex and the 6th Corbineau. The cuirassiers division Doumerc was detached from the 3rd Cavalry Corps to be made available to Oudinot.

We can find in the force under Marshal Oudinot, the same



cosmopolitan composition than in the all Grande Armée of 1812. Oudinot had indeed, under his orders 1,300 German (from hanseatic territory); 1,300 Portuguese; 4,000 Dutch; 1,600 Croats; 6,000 Swiss; 600 Poles and 25,000 French (but even among them, there is some Italians, Corsicans, etc.)

Later, because of losses, Oudinot will receive, in August, the reinforcement of the 6th Bavarian corps under General Gouvion-Saint-Cyr (who will win his stick of marshal); then, at the end of October, Marshal Victor with his 9th corps will reinforce him.

On the Russian side, Wittgenstein will be reinforced by 3,000 men from the garrison of Düna in August 13; 15,000 men (mostly militias) at the end of September; and mid-October, a strong and seasoned division from Riga under GM Steinheil.

After the skirmish action near Wilkomir, on June 28, Wittgenstein could retire without being worried, towards the river Dwina. On June 30, he was in Tauroghini, on July 1st, in Soloki, where he stays until the 3rd of July. At this date, he received order to cross the Dwina in Drouïa and to forbid Oudinot to cross the river in this area. On July 6, he was at Drisviaty; on 7, at Baslav; on 8, in front of Drouïa. The following day, he crossed the Dwina. His main force settled in Pridouisk (village in the north suburb of Drouïa), the reserve of Sazonov stayed in Drouïa and Kulniev covered Drouïa with the rear guard by

remaining on the left bank of the Dwina.

How can we explain that Wittgenstein was not worried by Oudinot during his retreat? It seems there is two reasons: the first one was the early bad conditions of his troops (see the letter of Colonel Thomasset from the 3rd Swiss regiment) in the

**Letter from Colonel Thomasset
(commanding officer of the 3rd Swiss
Infantry Regiment) to Colonel von May
in the regimental depot in Lille on 10 July:**

« You can have no concept of what we have suffered in this campaign. We have not had any bread for two months; only a little flour of which each soldier carries four pounds in a small sack. The entire country is devastated, the houses are looted, the peasants have fled. We have lost an incredible number of men due to the forced marches that we have had to make. We had to march 12 Meilen in 24 hours which drove our agony to the limit and meant that two thirds of the men fell out and are now with stragglers. They are trickling back day by day; I have met many, particularly from the 3rd Regiment - the waggons are always behind due to lack of horses; we replace them with whatever we can find, but the regiment loses about 20 per day despite this. The [regimental] artillery is without teams; the regiment now has no more than ten of the horses that we bought in Nimwegen. There have been two skirmishes with the enemy in the advance so far, one east of Wilna, one at Wilkomir; we only had to deploy two infantry regiments to put to flight a corps of 25,000 men. There are rumours of an early peace; I hope they are true and that we can leave this terrible land. The war in Spain was child's play compared to this, where we are short of everything; I haven't drunk any wine for two months. »

beginning campaign. Napoleon, aware of this problem, ordered his lieutenants, “not to fatigue his troops, to rally them, to try to organize the supplies and establish some good police”. Secondly, an impressive thunderstorm on June 29th and three days of heavy rains, will add to the slowness of the advance of the French marshal.

In any case, on July 4th, Oudinot is in Avanta, and on the 10th, he reaches Soloki, nine days after Wittgenstein!

This 10th of July, Wittgenstein got closer to the fortified camp of Drissa, which was prepared since many months by the Russians to accommodate defensive troops: his headquarters was in Balin, on the right of the entrenched camp of Drissa with his main formation (22 battalions, 8 squadrons & 72 guns: 14,000 men). His second line commanded by Sazonov (8 battalions: 5,000 men) was near Pridouisk, to keep contact with the troops who were in cover in front of Drouïa: Kulniev (4 battalions, 8 squadrons & 2 guns: 3,800 men) and Prince Repnin (2 battalions, 8 squadrons, 12 guns: 1,700 men). In the evening of July 10, only cavalry stayed in front of Drouïa, but which crossed the river too.



**General-Lieutenant Ivan Sazonov
(1755-1823)**

*George Dawe, the Military Gallery of the
Winter Palace*



Map of movements of French and Russian forces between June 24th and July 23rd 1812