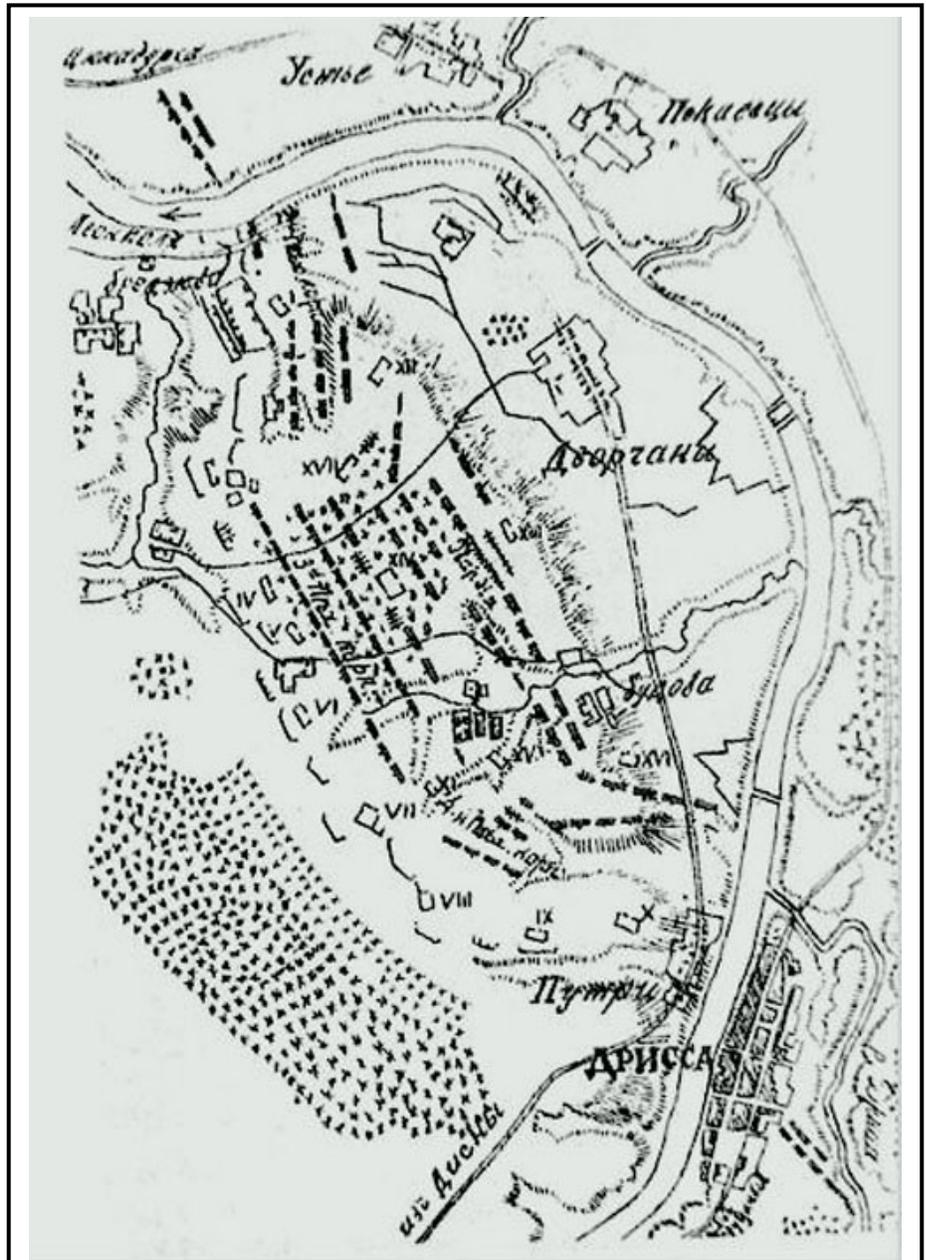


Chapter II: In front of Drissa

On July 12, Napoleon were in Vilna with his Guard. He wrote here orders for Ney, Murat and Oudinot to advance towards the Dwina, between Drouïa and Disna. In this advance, the second Corps had to keep his function of protecting the left of the Napoleon' forces. Because of the advance of these forces more to the east, Oudinot had to advance towards Drisviaty, and, in this way, he must keep watch to Düna burg.

But, the day before he received this order, to test the Russians defences in Düna burg, Oudinot had decided to direct all his forces on the road to this town. Already, on July 10, he had ordered division Legrand to go to Ezoros, in the direction of Düna burg.

Despite the order received from Napoleon to go further in the east, Oudinot decided to continue his movements towards Düna burg, persuading himself that he was obeying orders. But he neglected or dit not understand the main order (to go east) to retain only the secondary order (keep an eye on



Plan of the fortified camp of Drissa

*Hand-drawn map of the Drissa Camp of the Russian 1st army in 1812
(Military Encyclopedia. Vol. 9; St. Petersburg; 1912)*

Dünaburg). He even ordered Legrand to rank in order of battle at range of cannon from the citadel of Dünaburg. Of course, the French cannons could not compete with the more numerous Russian cannons installed on the ramparts and in the entrenchments and the infantry of the 6th division was subjected without reason to the fire of the Russian batteries. Oudinot said he had lost 112 men, killed and wounded, but had taken 160 prisoners.

Napoleon, when he learned the initiative of his Marshal, on July 14, wrote him his dissatisfaction. Indeed, he insisted that no attack should be made against the Russians, to put them to sleep, as it were. He hoped to be able to carry out a movement of overthrow of the 1st Russian Army by Polotsk to separate it from the 2nd Army Bagration.

At the reception of the vigorous letter of Napoleon, Oudinot withdrew to Drisviaty and occupied this town on July 16. Nevertheless, he left the division Legrand in front of Dünaburg for a while.

The day Napoleon wrote his dissatisfaction to Marshal Oudinot, on the Russian side, Wittgenstein was informed that there were only a few French pickets in front of Drouia. So, he gave order to Kulniev, who was staying in this town, to cross the Dwina and to attack the French outposts. At this time, the French forces who were in front of Drouia, were from Murat's forces.

After crossing the Dwina in the night of 14 and 15 of July, Kulniev, with the hussar of Grodno regiment and Cossacks of Platov, attacked by surprise two regiments of cavalry (11th French chasseurs à cheval & 10th Polish Hussar), at 1,5 miles from Drouia. The French-Polish cavalry was dispersed, lost 300 cavalrymen killed and wounded, and 150 prisoners too. Among the prisoners, was the general de Saint-Geniès, brigade commander of this cavalry. Russian sources said they have suffered only 12 killed and 63 wounded. Kulniev advanced deeper in the French device but, cautiously, he returned, crossed again the Dwina and will settle in Balin.

The day after, July 16, the main Russian force and the reserve went to Pokajewski to replace the 6th Russian Corps of Doctorov, who had just left the place.

Indeed, Napoleon's plan to overrun the Russians on their left, did not escape Barclay-de-Tolly, who will react accordingly. On 16 July, he wrote the following dispatch to Wittgenstein: "We decided to take the direction of Polotsk; today we begin this march. You will gather the battalions and reserve squadrons of Reprin and Hamen to your corps; You will remain separated in

order to act against the party which may pass the Dwina at Dünaburg, and chiefly to protect the whole country, from the Dwina to Novgorod.”

In a letter to the Czar, dated from July 17, Barclay-de-Tolly explained that Oudinot’s withdrawal movement in front of Dünaburg, confirmed him in the belief that the French were moving to the right to separate him from Bagration. So, Napoleon had rightly blamed Oudinot for having warned the Russian general by his movement towards Dünaburg. But perhaps he should have let him continue his attack against the town, to make diversion and lull Barclay-de-Tolly?

During that time, where was the 6th Bavarian corps, which will participate in the actions of the left wing from the 10th of August?

On June 15, this foreign corps, under the command of general Gouvion-Saint-Cyr, had a strength of nearly 25,000 men. In the book “Life of Gouvion-saint-Cyr” of Gay de Vernon, we see that the strength of the 19th division was 10,727 men and 20th division, 13,626.

On July 2, the Bavarians crossed the Niemen at Pilyony, and followed the main French Army of Napoleon. Arrived on July 6 at Anushichki, the Bavarians remained there until July 11.

Then, they reached Vilna and, on 14 July, when they paraded in front of Napoleon. The whole corps consisted of little bit less than 25,000 men. The next day, they lost their cavalry, attached to the 3rd reserve cavalry corps of Grouchy.

Gouvion-Saint-Cyr then leaved Vilna to go to Globukoje, where he arrived on July 22. In their march forward, the Bavarians have "the honor" to follow directly the Imperial Guard, which had already requisitioned the country.

On 25, Bavarians were at Usacz. They left this town the next day, for Bechenkovitschi, leaving nearly 1,100 men unable to continue the march. Always following Napoleon a few days' march after him, they arrived at Ostrowno, at about 20 miles before Vitebsk, after the battle between Murat and Ostermann (which took place on July 25 and 26). The Bavarian infantry will not go further on the road to Moscow because it's in Ostrowno that Gouvion St Cyr received order to return to Bechenkovitschi. After this return, on July 28, the 19th division had only 6,571 men able to bear arms, and the 20th division, 10,351. The 19th division also had 25 officers and 1,886 sick or missing men, who will return to the corps shortly, hoped St Cyr. It will be rather an

Memoirs of Captain Mallinger, from the 6th Bavarian Corps

“From June 13th, the whole ration was not given, but only half a ration or a quarter. From July 3rd, the bread completely was lacking at the 19th division. General Von Wrede, who had succeeded in providing for his division for a longer period, assisted the 19th for a few days. Soon it was lacking everywhere.

In order to calm the hunger of the soldier somewhat, the lack of bread was replaced by an increase of meat; For several days, they were distributed three times a day. The use of this meat without bread and salt, most often cooked in its own fat or roasted, combined with frequent baths in the neighboring ponds, which were authorized for the troops to be cleaned, the heat of the day and the freshness of the nights in marshy bivouacs, without straw or other bedding, caused the greatest disease of an army: the diarrhea.

This terrible and destructive disease spread rapidly and everywhere so generally, that for one non stricken, scarcely a third had suffered; Even the officers who were better nourished, could not protect themselves from it. From the day when the corps of 25,000 men paraded in front of the Emperor (July 14th), in a state that even misled his own officers over his real state, the daily loss increased beyond measure. The great exhaustion, which had already begun to be expressed by pale and hollow faces and a staggering gait, caused, in the painful marches from Vilna to the Dvina, the loss each day of 60 to 80 men by battalion, who remained behind the columns, and who, most of the time, died miserably from hunger and exhaustion.”

illusion Thus, in a month, the Bavarian infantry will fall from 24,000 to 17,000 men, having not participated in any combat: they lost on third of their strength.

The 6th corps will stay in Bechenkovitschi until August 5, before St Cyr receives order to help Oudinot in Polotsk, where he arrived on August 7. At this time, despite the rest in Bechenkovitschi, the 6th corps lost another 2,000 men and at the arrival in Polotsk, there were only 15,000 men.

In his memoirs, Gouvion-Saint-Cyr says that, of the 25,000 men presents on June 15, there is only 12,000 men able to fight at Polotsk at the arrival, 8,000 had already died from illness or fatigue, and 5,500 were sick without much hope of healing.

Between August 8 and 15, Gouvion wrote that another 1,000 men have been lost and so, it carried the numbers suitable for fighting to 11,000 Bavarians when the first battle of Polotsk took place.

According to another source, the result of the movements from August 8 to 16, was the reduction of the Bavarian forces from 16,000 to 12,500 men able to fight.

It seems, however, that we can count on 14,500 men (infantry, artillery & services) on the eve of the first battle of Polotsk: about 6,500 in the 19th division and 8,000 in the 20th.

Let us return to the sector of the Dwina river. It was on July 18, that Napoleon was informed, by various reports of Murat, of the march of de Tolly towards Polotsk, which started two days before. He then ordered Ney and Murat to follow the 1st Russian Army along the Dwina on the opposite bank.

On the same day, Oudinot, who had been in Drisviaty since the 16th, was authorized by Murat to move to Breslav to find better supplies. But in the same letter, Murat enjoined him to move the 9th division Merle to Drissa to dismantle the entrenchments of the Russian camp that they have just abandoned.

In his march to Polotsk, Barclay-de-Tolly wrote to Wittgenstein on July 19: "To watch the movements of the enemy, and to be able to support you if necessary, I left the Sixth Corps to Disna (the corps of Doctorov). [...] Your Excellency is now separated from the army, and our gracious monarch confides to you, with full confidence, the protection of that part of the land where you operate; and, in all cases, you must act according to your idea. The bases of your operations are Sebej, Pskov and Novgorod. You have to contain the enemy that is opposed to you, if it is possible, to beat him, and to protect Riga against a siege."

The forces of Wittgenstein at this time, was a little more than 24,000 men, to which were added the garrison of Dünaburg (3,300 men under General Hamen). The vanguard at that moment was at Balin under Kulniev, the main force on the Sarija river at Pokajewsky, the reserve in front of the Drissa camp. The whole river, from Dünaburg to Drissa, was guarded by posts.

On July 20, Oudinot received orders from Napoleon which confirmed Murat's orders: he must destroy the camp of Drissa. After that, he must hold Disna and keep watch on the banks of the Dwina between Disna and Dünaburg. Napoleon feared that other incursions, like that of Kulniev, will dangerously threaten the rear of Ney and Murat on the way to Polotsk.

On July 21, Oudinot, with the 6th, the 8th infantry divisions and the cuirassiers of Doumerc, arrived at Perebrode. The light cavalry brigade Corbineau stayed at Breslav; the 9th division and the light cavalry brigade Castex were in Milachevo, en route towards Drissa.

Even if Russian don't talk of this action, it seems that, on the night of the 21st to the 22nd of July, a new action took place near the ford of Drouia (where the French-Polish horsemen were surprised under Saint-Geniès eight days earlier): the 23rd Chasseurs a Cheval (Castex brigade) successfully repulsed the Hussars of Grodno, who had crossed the river. The Russian hussars were obliged to retreat through the ford, with sensible losses.

Another skirmish action would have taken place the same night, according to the testimony of some Swiss soldiers: on its way to Drissa, Merle's column had handed over the convoys to the 3rd Swiss Regiment. This regiment supported the fire of the enemy's batteries which were deployed on the left bank of the Dwina until evening. But as the enemy did not pretend to cross the river, the regiment hastened to rejoin the corps, leaving only the elite companies of the 3rd battalion in the rear. The small Swiss detachment took up a position about the castle of Leonpol, to the left of the road. He was soon attacked by the enemy, who, perceiving his isolation, passed the river by boat on the night of the 21st and 22nd of July. The Swiss waited very coldly the Russians. They succeeded in disengaging themselves by a sustained fire, and three vigorous charges with the bayonet. General Coutard came to the rescue of the detachment with a regiment of his brigade and two pieces of cannon. The convoys were thus saved. But nowhere else this struggle is mentioned, whether in the French or Russian archives.

On July 22, Murat specified to Oudinot that he had to finish the construction of a bridge begun by Ney at Disna, allowing him to pass on the right bank of the Dwina.

The day after, at 5 pm, Napoleon ordered the marshal to take his headquarters to Polotsk if possible: "All your aim is to have bridges and good bridgeheads on the Dwina; to march on Wittgenstein and keep him away from the river; to correspond with the Duke of Tarente, who must observe Dünaburg and make a bridge between Dünaburg and Jakobstadt; finally, to communicate with us by your right, and to flank the left of the Grande Armée, so that in all events you may support us if it becomes necessary. If circumstances allow you to place your headquarters in Polotsk, and give this town as your starting point, it will be advantageous: it seems that from Polotsk, strong vanguards on Sebej should force Wittgenstein to evacuate Drissa and Drouia. Until you hear news from the Duke of Tarente at Dünaburg, hold a column of observation, with

infantry and cavalry, to observe the garrison of Dünaburg, and to prevent long incursions; to do that, leave this column on the left bank between Drissa and Drouia.”

On July 23rd, to carry out orders received, with his main force, Oudinot begun his march from Perebrode to Disna. The leading division, that of Legrand, arrived at Disna at 6 pm. Oudinot only left the 9th division in front of Drissa with 300 cavalymen, to destroy the entrenchments and to keep watch on Dwina’s banks from Drissa to Drouia.

The French marshal thought that the construction of the bridge was well advanced, and he wanted to order his light cavalry to cross the river the next day, to cover the roads to Polotsk, to Drissa and to Sebej. But when he arrived at Disna with the division Legrand, Oudinot noticed that the bridge begun by Ney at this point was far from capable of allowing the crossing of two divisions of infantry and of the artillery of the corps. Moreover, the heavy rains delayed the arrival of the rest of his forces and the moment of the crossing too.

On July 24, Oudinot will receive two orders which seem contradictory. One from Murat, writing the 23th at 9 pm, and received the 24th at 10 am; Another from Napoleon himself, writing the 23th at 5 pm (four hours before Murat), but received the 24th at about 2 am (four hours after Murat).

Orders from Murat made Polotsk no longer a possible destination as in the previous dispatch (that of 23rd), but a priority objective. And from there, Oudinot had to push a strong vanguard towards St. Petersburg. At the same time, Merle must be recalled from Drissa to Disna.

Orders from Napoleon seemed to give the primary objective to cross the Dwina where Oudinot was and immediately pushed back Wittgenstein.

First, Oudinot was reluctant to obey the orders received (those of Murat) in reason of the dispersion of his forces: he could not see how to keep the banks of the Dwina from Disna to Polotsk, send a strong vanguard to St. Petersburg, and order troops to dismantle the Drissa camp, at the same time.

At the reception of Napoleon’s orders, he was relieved and envisaged to stay in Disna, await the establishment of the bridge and make all his Corps crossing it. He informed Murat, who, seeing that Oudinot was preparing to obey orders which had become obsolete, warned him that the present orders of Napoleon were the ones he had himself transmitted to him: Oudinot had go to Polotsk.

Therefore, on July 25th, Oudinot sent the division Legrand and the cuirassiers Doumerc towards Polotsk, by the left bank of the Dwina. The division Verdier had to wait at Disna, until the arrival of division Merle. This division, which were in front of Drissa, left the place when Merle received the Oudinot's orders. He only left here his 3rd brigade (3rd Swiss & 123rd line regiments) and 100 chasseurs à cheval, under the command of colonel Lagrange (colonel of the 20th chasseurs à cheval). The leader of this 3rd brigade, general Coutard was already absent because he was made governor of Vidzoui.

Meanwhile, the withdrawal movement of the first Russian army continued: Barclay-de-Tolly had left Polotsk and headed for Vitebsk. As Barclay-de-Tolly had written to Wittgenstein, the first Russian Corps was going to have to fight, isolated.

To cover roads towards St. Petersburg, Wittgenstein decided to keep watch to Disna: on July 20th, general Balk arrived at Lozovka (or Borovka) with the two battalions of Converged Grenadiers from 5th division, 6 guns from the Horse Battery #3 and a detachment from the Riga Dragoon Regiment (about 1,200 men in all).

General Balk had orders to keep communications with the rest of the 1st Russian Corps and to keep watch on the banks of the Dwina. If necessary, he had to attack French forces which tried to cross the Dwina near Disna, and, if these forces will be to large, he had to retreat to Wolinzi (i.e. Valintzy).

On July 21st, general Balk moved back to Wolinzi because of the presence of large French forces in Disna (it was III Corps Ney). Wittgenstein strengthened Balk with the depot battalion of the 36th Jäger Regiment, the two other battalions of Converged Grenadiers from 14th division, two depot Grenadiers battalions, one squadron of depot from the Hussar Guard and 6



General de brigade
Louis François Coutard (1769-1852)
(Amable-Paul Coutan, Musée de l'Armée, Paris)

guns from the Position Battery #28 (2,000 more men). He gave command of this entire force to general Kazatchkowsky. This general has to retreat towards Osveia if necessary.

Wittgenstein, seeing that Oudinot was not trying to cross the Dwina (we were on July 21st and Oudinot was in front of Drissa camp), thought that the French marshal will not cross the Dwina but would soon follow the Grande Armée towards Vitepsk. So, he decided to pass on the left bank of the Dwina at Drouia, on the rear of Oudinot.

It was on July 23rd, at noon, that the Russian vanguard, which were at Pokajewsky, begun the movement ordered by Wittgenstein; soon followed by the main force and the reserve, using an invisible road for the French eyes. He ordered Kazatchkowsky to go to Pokajewsky, while Balk remained in Wolinzi with his 1,200 men.

The vanguard reached Pridouisk on the night of 23-24th and immediately some squadrons of cavalry and the 25th Jäger regiment passed on the left bank of the river. The rest of Wittgenstein's forces reached Pridouisk in the morning.

However, alerted by Hamen announcing enemy movements in front of Jakobstadt, and learning that, on 23rd, Oudinot left Perebrode and marched to Disna, Wittgenstein dreaded a combined attack of the two marshals on his two wings, trying to destroy him. He then decided to abandon his project of offensive and to place himself in a central position at Ratitzi.

Immediately the reserve headed for this village, while the main corps