

Chapter IV

A Too Cautious Marshal

August 2nd-16th

Status-quo

On August 2nd, Oudinot continued his retreat towards Polostk. He thought that Wittgenstein had more troops than really and will try to outflank him. So, he let only the cavalry brigade Castex in rearguard on the road to Nevel and the cavalry brigade Corbineau went on the road from Disna to Sebej. The division Legrand settled in front of Polotsk and the rest of his Corps in Polotsk but on the left bank of the Dwina.

In a dispatch of August 2nd, Oudinot asked for reinforcements if Napoleon would order him to resume the offensive. It seemed that Napoleon asked him to send troops to Drissa to finish the destruction of the Russian entrenchments. Oudinot thought that this last order was hazardous: "The second corps is considerably diminished by the losses it has sustained in the combats, by sickness, by the wandering of the stragglers, by the escorts of the convoys sent to various points, by the detachment made to Vidzoui, by the garrison of Polotsk, by the successive escorts of the prisoners and pieces of artillery taken from the enemy, and finally by the desertion which left me worried

about foreign regiments. It is to the point that I barely reckon 5,000 combatants in the division of General Merle; and, despite what is presented by the states of situation furnished by the corps, I do not estimate at 20,000 bayonets the presents under arms to the army corps."

In the same dispatch, Oudinot asked the autorisation to delete the regimental artillery that only embarrass him, he wrote; he wanted

Description of the town of Polotsk by Captain Mallinger

"Polotzk is the oldest town in White Russia, with some 400 houses and 2,000 habitants. There are also five abbeys including that of the Jesuits, which was the largest and finest. It was here that Marshals Oudinot and Saint-Cyr set up their headquarters. Most of the inhabitants were Jews who carried on a not inconsiderable trade with Riga. From the remaining walls and deep ditches behind the Jesuit abbey and on the far side of the Malo Polotzk suburb, it is clear that the town had once been very well defebded." (in Napoleon against Russia, a concise history of 1812, Digby Smith)

to transfer the artillerymen to the divisional batteries.

It was a dispatch from Merle to Oudinot, on August 3rd, which described the situation of his division: Merle said that if the situations give 5,940 men on the paper, less than 5,000 can fight because of epidemic of diarrhoea (dysentery). Merle complained too about the regimental artillery.

When Napoleon saw the news from Oudinot, he decided to send him the Bavarian VI Corps of general Gouvion St Cyr, in order to resume the offensive and drive back Wittgenstein far from the Dwina.

At this time, the Bavarians were near Bechenkovitchi (which is on the Dwina), but in a state of exhaustion, especially because of lack of bread.

Napoleon, in a dispatch to Davout, where he gave him the situations of the different corps of the Grande Armée, wrote the result of the battle of the three days (July 30th & 31st, & August 1st) of Oudinot against Wittgenstein: 3,000 Russian prisoners, 14 guns taken, "lots of killed". He estimated that the French losses were double what Oudinot admitted in his dispatch of August 3rd: so twice more than 1,200 killed and wounded.

On August 10th, we see that Oudinot gave to Berthier the real losses during these three days:



Count, then Marquis, Laurent Gouvion St Cyr (1764-1830)

(Horace Vernet, Palace of Versailles)

He was a rather original and solitary man and a good violinist. Painter in Paris at the beginning of the Revolution, he joined the Army in 1792. He became general of division as early as 1794. To the army of the Rhine from 1792 to 1797, he was well noted by Hoche who designates him as his successor to his death. In the Army of Italy then Naples in 1805-1807. He was in Spain in 1808 as commander of the VII Corps. He besieged Girona when he learned his replacement by Augereau. He left his post without waiting for his successor: disgraced and put under arrest for this fact. Reinstated in 1811, he was placed at the head of the Bavarian VI Corps in February 1812. On August 18th at Polotsk, he was wounded but his victory earned him the baton of marshal; Again wounded seriously at the foot on October 18th, he remained at his post but, at the arrival of Victor, he retired to recover health. In 1813, from August, he was put at the head of the XIV Corps, and he had to conduct the defense of Dresden. Capitulated in November 1813, he returned to France in June 1814. He stood aside during the Hundred Days.

Unloved of his soldiers and subordinates because of his easily haughty attitude, he had tendency to jealousy and was unconcerned about his men. However, he was respected because of his military and tactical science. His cautious, thoughtful and calm character made him a chief more especially gifted for defensive, but on the contrary too circumspect in the offensives.

3,400 killed and wounded, not to mention prisoners!

It was on August 4th at 10 am that Gouvion St Cyr received the order to leave Bechenkovitchi for Polotsk. He decided to go by the left bank of the Dwina. He thought his Corps will arrive on August 7th. On 5th, he was in Oula and on 7th, in Polotsk. Like we see, when the Bavarians arrives at Polotsk, the VI Corps had about 15,000 men.

While waiting for Napoleon's response to his letter asking for reinforcements in the event of a renewal of the offensive, Oudinot decided to obey the Emperor's request for Drissa. He ordered two brigades of the division Merle and the 6th cavalry brigade Corbineau to prepare to leave for August 5th, in the way to Drissa.

On this day scheduled for departure to Drissa, the orders were canceled: Indeed, Oudinot had just received reports indicating that a strong enemy presence was in Drissa (it was an error or a false report). He preferred not to expose Merle to being outnumbered. The same day, he received the good news of the coming arrival of the VI Corps to reinforce it. He decided to resume the offensive as soon as the Bavarians arrived.

It is impressive to note the exaggeration of the reports of the French on the Russian forces opposed to them on Polotsk, as well as on their losses during the three days of combat: for Oudinot and an officer sent by Napoleon himself, the

Russians would have lost 10,000 men in the fighting from the 30th of July to the 1st of August; and they would still have between 34 and 40,000 men!

In fact, after the battles, Wittgenstein settled on Sokolitschi with in main force. The vanguard, now under Helfreich (6 battalions, 11 squadrons & 12 guns) was in Siwochina, with scouts towards Wolinzi and Polotsk.

On August 3rd, knowing the French retreat to Polotsk, he ordered his vanguard to go to Bieloe and his main force to Siwochina.

He sent the Cuirassiers under Prince Repnin to Wolinzi, in order to keep watch on Disna. Informed by Hamen of French movements in the area of Dünaburg (in fact, Radziwill left Dünaburg to get closer to main force of Macdonald), Wittgenstein decided to bring back his main force in the central position of Ratitzi, between Oudinot and Macdonald.

Wittgenstein reached Kochanowichi on the 6th and Ratitzi on the 7th of August. The vanguard moved too and settled at Pokajewski, except for four squadrons of Grodno hussars which went to Wolinzi.

Finding that the ennemy had left Dünaburg, Hamen left only the converged hussars in front of Jakobstadt, while, freed from the enemy presence in front of Dünabourg, he moved to rejoin Wittgenstein. It will arrive in the night of August 13th.

To protect his right flank against possible incursions of men from

Macdonald's forces, Wittgenstein sent Balk with four battalions, a regiment of Cossacks and 12 guns, to Drouia.

For a while, Wittgenstein thought of crossing the Dwina between Macdonald and Oudinot, to

A new offensive?

As soon as they arrived at Polotsk on August 7th, Gouvion-Saint-Cyr and von Wrede met Oudinot and the offensive was decided. It will be done without the generals Albert and Pouget, sick and who will remain in Polotsk. The divisions Legrand and Verdier and the cavalry brigade Castex took positions between Siwochina and Bieloe; the division Merle and the cavalry brigade Corbineau, at Lozovka; the division of Wrede, at Gamzelovo; the division Deroy and the cuirassiers in front of Polotsk.

Gouvion St Cyr seemed not to be agree to fight and Oudinot was in a great indecision on the option to be taken. He was confronted with contradictory reports, and not knowing where the enemy was. Finally, on August 8th, he learned that the Russians would be between Drissa on the west and Swolna on the east.

He decided to take the road to Osveia this time, and not this to Sebej, like in the offensive at the end of July. But to avoid any surprise on his flanks, he organized his forces in two columns. The left one was under Gouvion St Cyr, bringing together the infantry divisions Merle and Deroy, the Cuirassiers and the brigade

annoy the French and because Oudinot seemed to be inactive. He then gave order to build a bridge at Drouia on August 9th. But, informed of the arrival of Bavarian reinforcements in Polotsk, he suspended his project.



**Prince Nikolay Grigorievich
Repnin-Volkonsky (1778-1845)**

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

He took part in Campaign of 1805 and was present in the battle of Austerlitz, within a regiment of cavalry of the guard. Badly wounded at Austerlitz, he was taken prisoner and Napoleon had him released without compensation. However, he was obliged to leave the service due to his deficient health following his injury.

He returned to service in 1812 and took part, at the head of four squadrons of cuirassiers, two of whom belonged to the guard, to the battles of Kliastitzky, Swolna, Polotsk and Czarnicky.

On February 20th, 1813, the troops under his command entered first in Berlin. He was then governor general of the kingdom of Saxony until the end of the war.

Corbineau: it had to leave Lozovka towards Wolinzi and passed the Drissa at this point. The right column, under the Marshal himself, with the

Oudinot, as planned. The two columns forgathered at Wolinzi. Gouvion St Cyr remained there, with his VI Corps and the 3rd cheveu-legers,

Dispatch from von Wrede to his King, August 13th, 1812

"Your Majesty will have seen in the report that we have sent to him, together General Deroy and I, on the 11th of this month, the state of the two corps of the army; The steps and counter steps, lack of food, heat and roads threw more soldiers into the hospitals and made us lose more men than if we had done the bloodiest battle. His Majesty the Emperor granted a few days' rest to the VI Corps, ten days ago; She wanted it to be able to recover in the position of Bechenkovitschi. This rest had not lasted 24 hours, when the VI Corps was ordered to assist the Marshal, Duke of Reggio, commanding the II Corps (after a brilliant affair, it had suffered some losses, and had to retreat to Polotsk) and to remain under his command, until further notice. Since then, the VI Corps has made several steps and counter steps. [...] All these movements, executed with a continual lack of bread, increase my sick." (in Campagne de Russie, 11-19 août, Fabry)

Account of Captain Mallinger

"There was scarcely ever any bread, but we did have some meat. As there was no salt, we used gunpowder to season the soup. The water was bad and undrinkable, as all the wells and streams were tainted with the corpses of men and horses." (in Napoleon against Russia, a concise history of 1812, Digby Smith)

Account from sergeant Schrafel (5th Bavarian Infantry Regiment)

He wrote that he and others drank water "from a large puddle, which looked like brown paint and was full of countless tiny worms." (in Napoleon against Russia, a concise history of 1812, Digby Smith)

infantry divisions Legrand, Verdier, and von Wrede and the cavalry brigade Castex, had to cross the Drissa at Danowiczi (or Czernowiczi) from Bieloe, after having thrown a bridge there.

Oudinot estimated the Russian forces at about 40,000 men. In a report sent to Napoleon, Captain d'Hautpoul, aide-de-camp of the Emperor, gave the same figures and announced that the French had 2,000 wounded evacuated on Vilna. On August 9th, the two columns continued their march forward and crossed the Drissa, at Wolinzi for Gouvion St Cyr, at Danowiczi for

while Oudinot planned to advance the next day to Swolna with his II corps and the cuirassiers. According to Prince de Tour and Taxis, Gouvion St Cyr protested against this movement forward.

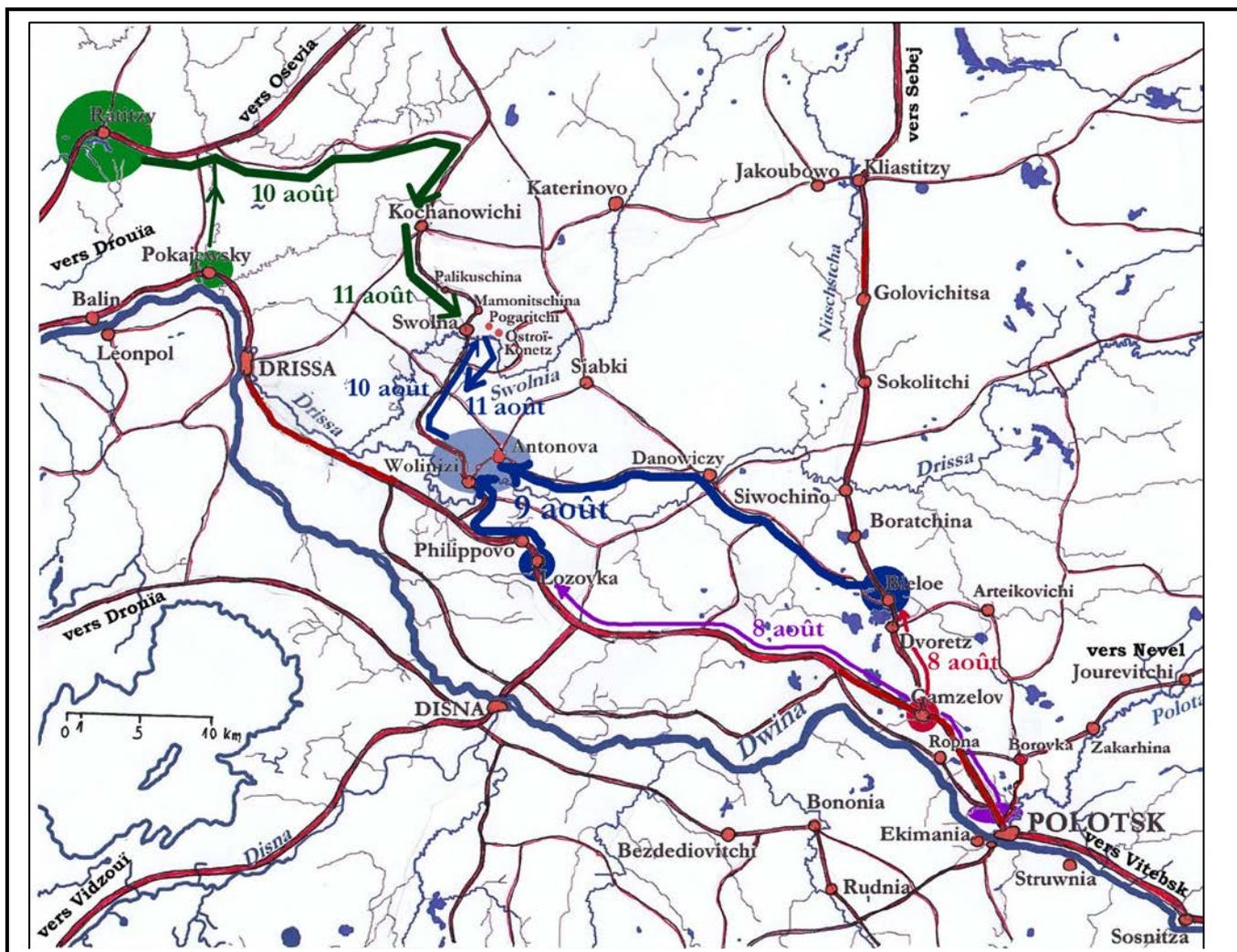
Wittgenstein being absent due to the slight injury at the head he received on August 1st, it was his chief of staff, general Auvray, who commanded. Detecting troop movements on the Swolna on August 9th, Auvray thought it was a diversion to mask a new offensive of Oudinot by the road to Sebej. He decided to intercept him by the same road as ten

days before. Appointment is done to all forces available in Kochanowichi.

The vanguard of Helfreich arrived there on the 10th, almost at the same time as the French outposts, which are easily dislodged, and which retreated to the Swolna. The rest of the Russian forces advanced from Ratitzi in the following order: vanguard under Kazachkowski (23rd Jäger, 2 squadrons of the Iambourg dragoons and 9 guns); 1st line under Berg (Perm, Mohilev, Kalouga and Sevesk infantry regiments, Cuirassiers and Position batteries #5 & 28); 2nd line under Sazonof (Toula, Navajinsk, Tenguinsk and Estonia infantry regiments, Position battery #14 & Light battery #27); Reserve under Kachowski (the 2

Combined Grenadier battalions of the 14th division, the 6 Grenadier Depot battalions, the 2 other Iambourg Dragoons squadrons, Horse battery #3 & half Position battery #27).

On August 10th, therefore, Oudinot carried forward the two brigades of light cavalry on the road to Kochanowichi, followed by the rest of his II corps and the cuirassiers. There were two bridges built on the Swolna, one in the village of Swolna and the other in the village of Ostroi-Konetz. A battalion (apparently from each of the light infantry regiments) was placed to keep each bridge, while the cavalry pushed outposts on Kochanowichi and met, like we said, the vanguard of Helfreich.



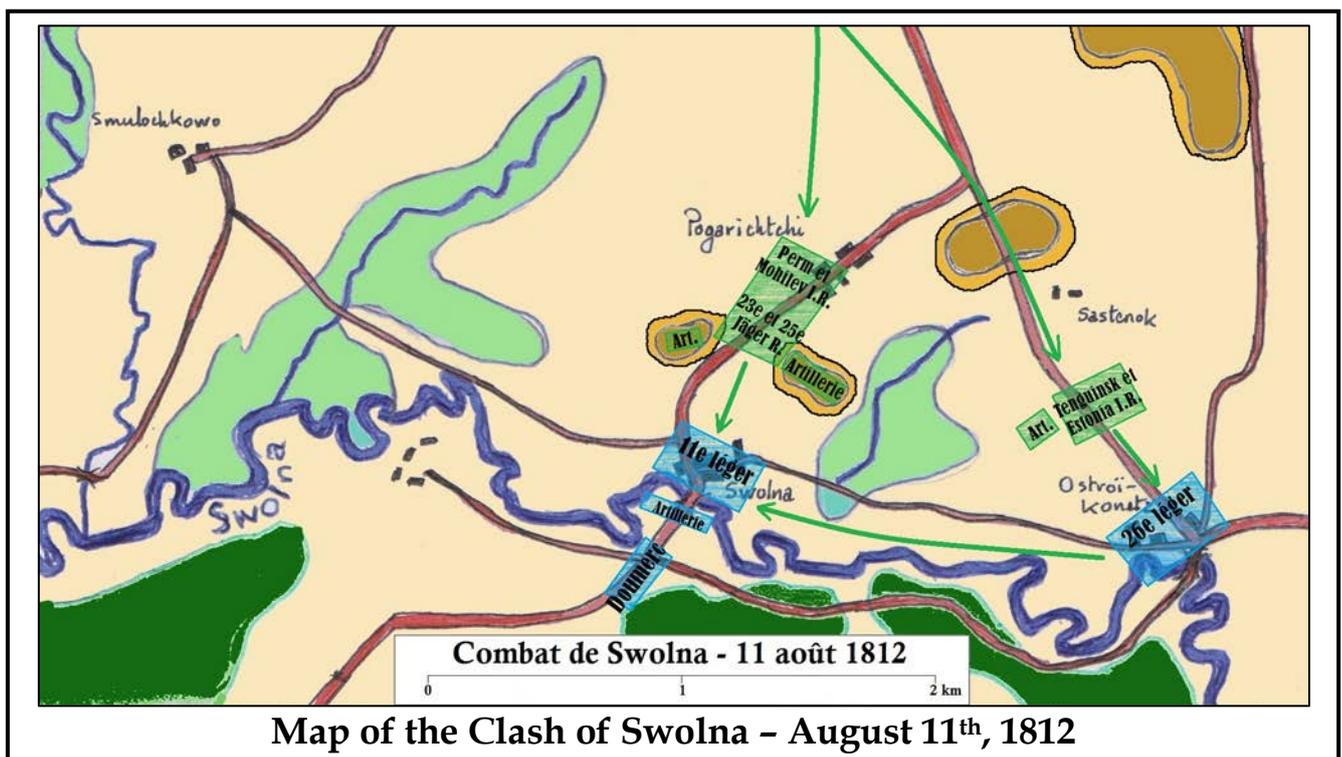
Clash at Swolna -August 11th

It was at 11 am, the next day, August 11th, that Oudinot was warned about the skirmish which had taken place at Kochanowichi, and which revealed the presence of strong enemy columns. From there, the reports are quite contradictory, according to the sources.

The Russians admitted a loss of 400 men and the death of Colonel Denissiew commanding the 25th Jäger regiment. They estimated the loss of the French to 1,500 killed and wounded (including General Verdier, wounded) and 300 prisoners. But in a letter to General Essen, Wittgenstein wrote: "We made about 300 prisoners and there were 500 men killed and wounded": these figures seem closer to reality as we shall see.

For Oudinot, the clash would be a simple skirmish, on the right bank of

the river. He wrote that he wanted to provoke the Russian to the fault by drawing him to the other side of the Swolna (which don't succeed because, according to him, the excessive obstinacy of the tirailleurs of the 26th Light infantry regiment). The lack of aggressiveness from the Russians would have led Oudinot to believe that the troops present at Swolna were a diversion, while the main enemy force took the same road that two weeks before and would outflank the right French wing (it was the first intention of d'Auvray). It was the reason why he ordered his troops to move back and sent Gouvion St Cyr to Bieloe and the fords of Siwochina and Danowicz. Oudinot gave the losses of 320 men, the injury of general Amey (who fell from his horse killed under him. He wrote too that Colonel Casablanca, commander of the 11th



Light infantry regiment, had been badly wounded as well as the Major of the same regiment; and finally, that the cuirassiers had made 100 prisoners among the Russians who had passed the Swolna.

The Russian sources said that the engagement was more significant, and it seems that it was the reality. On the morning of the 11th, the French remaining inactive, while they seemed to want a confrontation, Auvray decided to take himself the offensive. The Grodno hussars and the Cossacks forming the vanguard, easily rejected the French forces in front of them, on the river Swolna. But, they are received there by infantry. Auvray then carried infantry forward, that of the vanguard and of the 5th division: they took position in the village of Pogarichtchi.

Two squadrons of the guard covered the right flank, and the two others with the Iambourg dragoons and the Grodno hussars, were placed on the left flank of the first Russian line. The rest of the Russian forces formed a second line behind Mamonovshchina, while the reserve stands in Paluikovshchina.

According to the Russian general, the villages of Pogarichtchi, Swolna and Ostroy-Konetz were heavily occupied by the French infantry, the right leaning on Ostroy-Konetz and the left on Swolna. French moving back quickly from Pogarichtchi, Auvray sent the Tenguinsk and Estonia regiments, supporting by the Position battery #14,

against Ostroi-Konetz, held by the 26th French light infantry regiment. The village was abandoned by the French, (not quickly enough at

the 11th French Light Infantry Regiment

This regiment earns a particular note because of the troops which compose it. Of recent formation (1811), it was formed from prestigious battalions: the battalion of Tirailleurs Corses (becoming the 1st battalion); the battalion of Tirailleurs du Po (2nd battalion of the regiment); the battalion of Tirailleurs de la Legion du Midi (3rd battalion, of Piedmontese origin like the previous one) and the battalion Valaisan (becoming the 4th battalion, from Switzerland). In a letter to Oudinot, General Lorencez, the Chief of Staff of the II Corps, gave on October 17th, an unflattering opinion on this unity: "The 2nd division has gained a lot in the hands of Maison; But it has two very bad units, and the 11th Light is even worse than the 124th." It seems in fact that the glorious and elite battalions (especially Tirailleurs Corses and Tirailleurs du Po) were reinforced by very young soldiers when the regiment had been arised. Having lost many officers, which include its colonel, who had died from the wounds he received on August 14th, the regiment not kept up with its reputation during the first day of the first battle of Polotsk against Russian cuirassiers. And then his reputation had suffered of this episode. Incidentally, when the regiment, or what remains of it, arrived near Studianka and met the rest of the Grande Armée, to support the morale of the troops, "the men of the 11th regiment, who had the most pleasant voices, united by platoons, and throughout the night, the wild forests which we passed through, sounded the most harmonious Italian songs" (major-surgeon of the Battalion Valaisan in 1812).

Oudinot's will) and the regiments crossed the river again after burning the bridge.

Master of Pogarichtchi since the beginning of the fight and now from Ostroi-Konez, Auvray started to assault the farm of Swolna on his right. The French were also forced to evacuate, but the rear guard had been cut off and, unable to cross the river, 200 men had been taken prisoners.

However, without order, the Perm, Mohilev and Estonia regiments then crossed the bridge following the retreat of the French and were brought back in great disorder by the cuirassiers of Doumerc (4th cuirassiers).

Some of the French cavalry, carried away by their ardor, a squadron apparently, crossed the bridge of Swolna, but two squadrons of the Grodno hussars threw out the

Back to Polotsk

To obey Oudinot's orders, von Wrede came to Antonova on August 12th, with the cavalry brigade Corbineau; Deroy arrived in the evening at Lozovka. The II Corps moved back near Wolinizi.

On 13th, von Wrede arrived at Bieloe, and then at the bank of the Drissa. The next day, he threw a bridge to push a scouting on the road to Sebej. Oudinot having momentarily thought to stay around Wolinizi, finally decided to move back on Polotsk, perhaps because of reports announcing the arrival of the 32nd

squadron of cuirassiers. Meanwhile, the French cuirassiers would have made on this occasion a hundred infantry prisoners.

Whatever may be the truth of the facts, this fight will comfort Oudinot in his hesitations.

Martinien gives 21 French officers killed or wounded on August 11th (4 for the 26th light infantry, 10 for the 11th, 1 for 2nd line infantry, 1 to 23rd Chasseurs à cheval & 5 for the 4th cuirassiers). If we take the same ratio of losses that in the fights of Jakoubowo-Kliastitzy (1 officer for 20 to 25 soldiers), we can estimate the French losses of about 450 to 500 men, without the prisoners, who were perhaps 200. These figures seem to be very close to those given by Wittgenstein in his letter to Essen: 500 killed and Injured and 300 prisoners.

Russian division of which he overestimated the numbers.

In any case, while he ordered the retreat of the II Corps to Polotsk, he ordered division Deroy, which arrived at Lozovka the day before, to rejoin von Wrede at Bieloe. Deroy obeyed right away, but three hours after leaving Lozovka, he received a new order from Oudinot who told him to stop where he was. Oudinot, which II Corps had stayed for too much time in Wolinizi. Dreading that all the forces of Wittgenstein followed him, he wanted the Bavarian division to reinforce him, in the event of a

Russian attack. We can imagine what these orders and counter-orders, marches and countermarches will do on the state of health of the Bavarian troops, already in great difficulty at this time.

On August 12th and 13th, the Russians don't move. They awaited



Bavarian General-Leutnant Count Karl Philipp von Wrede (1767-1838)

(unknown author; in Bay. Armeemuseum)

He was second-in-command of the Bavarian Army and became commander-in-chief at the death of Deroy on 18 August 1812. Good subordinate but a mediocre strategist, he will act with bravery during the campaign. Annoyed with his relations with Saint-Cyr, he will take advantage of the retreat from Polotsk to escape from authority of Saint-Cyr and lead a separate retreat. In 1813, charged to neutralize the Austrian Corps on the Inn, he urged the King of Bavaria to join the Allied coalition on October 8th. At the head of an Austro-Bavarian army of 60,000 men, he attempted to cut the road to the French army in retreat from Leipzig. He failed and was seriously wounded on this occasion.

the return of Wittgenstein (he reintegrated his command on 12th) and

the coming of the garrison of Dünaburg. In fact, in the night of August 13th, Hamen arrived on the Swolna with the Dünaburg garrison. This garrison consisted of the 32nd division, made up of depot battalions. It is a great word that "division" for the few 3,000 men who made up this force. The numbers of these nine battalions were so weak that they are united in three regiments of about 1,000 men each, one of Chasseurs and two of Musketeers.

However, this 32nd understaffed division played an important role: Oudinot believed that Wittgenstein received considerable reinforcements - a whole infantry division, therefore about 7 to 8,000 men - and for this reason, he gave up his offensive against St. Petersburg. He preferred to retreat to Polotsk and threaten the lines of communication of the enemy, hoping to make him back. This decision seemed safer to him than to venture even further north towards Sebej, with the enemy on his left flank and threatening his own lines of communication.

But ordering that, he disregarded the express order of Napoleon, which was to take the offensive and to reject Wittgenstein away from the Dwina. To explain his decision to Napoleon, Oudinot adduced the weakness of the forces of his II Corps, the appalling state of tiredness of the VI Corps, the growing decay of the horses, and the forces of Wittgenstein, which he judged being

formidable, and receiving regular new reinforcements.

According to Prince de Tour and Taxis, when he abandoned Wolinzi, Oudinot would also have abandoned the French wounded in the battle of Swolna, who were there.

As soon as he returned to action, Wittgenstein decided not to lose contact with Oudinot, despite the relative weakness of his forces: he wanted to fix Oudinot's forces at Polotsk. Thus, he prevented him, if he should wish to do so, either to send reinforcements to Macdonald, or to advance towards St. Petersburg. Moreover, the indecision of Oudinot made the Russians extremely confident. As Colonel Diebitsch testified, "the indecision of the enemy's maneuvers near Swolna and his inaction at Wolinzi led him [i.e. Wittgenstein] to believe that he would not undertake an offensive movement any time soon."

It was probably at 1 pm on the 14th, that the Russian forces began to go in the footsteps of the French. In the evening, the vanguard reached Philippovo while the main force stopped at Wolinzi. Wittgenstein then organized two separate forces



Bavarian General-Leutnant Count Bernhard Erasm von Deroy (1743-1812)

(from <http://www.twcenter.net/forums>)

He was the best Bavarian General of Napoleon ("The conduct of Leutnant-General Deroy His conduct deserves the highest praises; he is an old officer, plenty of honor, extremely attached to the Elector, of whom he is the friend": 19th Bulletin de la Grande Armée, 1805)

Native of an old family of Picardie, he took part, from 1756 to 1763, in the Seven Years' War, at the end of which, he was already a captain. In 1777, he entered the service of Bavaria. In 1800, he was wounded and taken prisoner by the French at Hohenlinden.

In 1805, he commanded a Bavarian division under Bernadotte, engaged in the North of Tyrol. He was wounded in the clash of Pass Strub (2-3 November 1805). In 1806, he was at the head of a division in the Schlessig in Prussia. The following year, he seized Glatz (20-24 June 1807) and in December, he was in charge of the general command of the Bavarian Army, which he would keep until his death.

In 1809, in the first part of the campaign, he illustrated himself in Abensberg then in Eckmühl. He was then beaten several times by Tyrolean patriot Höfer.

He participated in the campaign of Russia in 1812 at the head of the 19th Bavarian division. He was mortally wounded in the first battle of Polotsk battle, on August 18th; His death, on August 24th, will be severely felt by his men who had nicknamed him "Papa Deroy".

which were to act separately from the main force of his army: on the left, colonel Vlastov (24th Jäger, 2 battalions of grenadiers & 200 Cossacks) had to reach Kliastitz and then, to go towards Polotsk by the road of Sebej; On the right, Prince Reprin (the converged Cuirassiers & the Converged Jager depot battalion) marched on Disna.

The aim was to force Oudinot to cross the Dwina at Polotsk.

On the evening of the 14th, the cavalry brigade Castex, the cuirassiers and the division Legrand were at Lozovka; The division Verdier, at Smolaki with Oudinot himself; The division Merle, rearwards. The division Deroy was at three hours of walking from Lozovka, on the road to Bieloe, where the order to halt reached the Bavarian general the day before. The division von Wrede and the cavalry brigade Corbineau were at Bieloe with general Gouvion St Cyr.

The scouting carried out by Gouvion showed that the Russians were in no way engaged on the road from Sebej to Polotsk. Indeed, the order given to Vlastov to move to this area was from the evening of the 14th.

Finding the position of Lozovka too undulating, cut off by numerous woods and hardly defensible for these reasons, Oudinot decided to continue his retreat on Polotsk.

On the morning of the 15th, Deroy brook camp to join Polotsk, as did the II Corps. Legrand was in charge of the rearguard and was

Observation of Maillinger in his diary

"Napoleon's ADC, Hautpoul arrived with dispatches for General Saint-Cyr. He came to me and asked me to have a meal prepared for him and to find him a spot to sleep for a few hours as he had had neither rest nor food for some days. I gave him what I have; a good soup, some mutton and a glass of good Schnaps and showed him to a corner where there was a heap of half rotten straw on which a couple of dozen men had already died. He fell upon it at once and asked me to wake him at 3 o'clock in the morning. [...] Next day headquarters was moved to a fine castle in the village of Bjelaja; I had some flour with me and the nobleman who owned the place gave me some more. One of my company, Enderlein, was a good baker, so I had bread baked for the company. Every man received half a loaf; as there was plenty of meat and Schnaps, we were very comfortable on the 13th and 14th. Next day, at 10 o'clock in the morning, we were attacked by Russian light cavalry and Cossacks; after exchanging some shots with us, they withdrew into the forest. At 4 o'clock that afternoon a more serious assault was launched on the castle; probably the owner had told Wittgenstein's men that the enemy commander was in his house." (in Napoleon against Russia, a concise history of 1812, Digby Smith)

rushed to Lozovka by the Russians and then, he bivouacked at Smoliaki, facing the Russian vanguard, only separated from the ennemy by a stream.

Von Wrede stayed the day of the 15th at Bieloe, without being bothered until the arrival of the Russians in the evening. This was Vlastov, who had passed the Drissa at Siwochina during the day and stopped at Oboïarschina.

Gouvion St Cyr don't consider himself in immediate danger, but his orders were to move back at night on Gamzelovo and join the II Corps. "This night march" wrote Prince de Tour and Taxis, "will always leave me with an extremely disagreeable image. Our

people suffered from dysentery,

the clash of Swolna and the return to Polotsk on August 15th.



Colonel (then General-Major) Egor Vlastov (1770-1837)

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

which, during the three days of rest, had increased; They were so exhausted that many remained on the road, though it was represented to them that they would necessarily be taken prisoners. The threats themselves had no result; The moral force had disappeared with physical force. For many, it was at least observably the case, and this retrograde march cost us as many people as a lively battle. And yet, as Gouvion-Saint-Cyr and the good behavior of the Bavarians on August 17 and 18 in Polotsk testify, they "had an extreme desire to gain one's spurs against the enemy."

Wittgenstein, in the letter to General Essen already quoted, writes that the enemy "lost 2,000 men as prisoners in [the] retreat", between

On August 15th, Prince Repnin seized Disna by a stroke. He burnt the bridge rebuilt by the French at this place and then rejoined the main Russian force at Lozovka.

In a letter to Napoleon, Oudinot tried to protect himself against the rumors that many of his men were taken prisoner by the Russians. Indeed, in a letter of August 11th, Wittgenstein announced that a small detachment of the Grodno hussars had captured 400 men on the banks of the Dwina and took a whole convoy of bread destined to the forces of Oudinot.

In his letter to Napoleon, Oudinot explained that "the enemy having always stood between Drissa and Drouia during the movement of the army on Vitebsk; the troops he



General-Major Bogdan Helfreich (1773-1843)

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

had there, could easily go on the other bank of the Dwina and take lots of marauders and stragglers of the I and III Corps. The II Corps has a considerable number of deserters among the Swiss and the Portuguese; The Russians made a trophy of that.”

The Emperor having warned Oudinot that, in his opinion, Wittgenstein's aim was to go to Vitebsk, the marshal considered for a moment that he should let the VI corps at Polotsk while himself with the II Corps would take the road to Nevel to cover Vitebsk. The arrival of Wittgenstein on Polotsk will make this intention obsolete.

Indeed, on August 16th, Wittgenstein continued to follow the retreat of the troops of Oudinot.

Four main roads lead to Polotsk: that of St. Petersburg which passes to Sebej (and to which, the road of Dünaburg joins about 5 miles from Polotsk at Gamzelovo); That of Vitebsk, which runs along on the right bank of the Dwina; That of Nevel, and finally that of Vilna.

Oudinot, who on the evening of the 15th had arrived at Gamzelovo, took the road to Polotsk on the morning of the 16th. Von Wrede was ordered to settle on the Nevel road when he will reach Polotsk. His 3rd Brigade, temporarily under the command of Colonel Habermann, would provide the outposts on this road. Deroy's division had to establish itself behind his compatriot, to the right of the city. It was Verdier's division which was to furnish the outposts on

the road to Sebej and Dünabourg, bound by his right to the Bavarians. The rest of the Marshal's forces were to join behind this first line.

It was first on the road to Nevel, around 2 pm, that the Russians appeared, probably the vanguard of Vlastov. But, it will have only a short cannonade and for the French, it was only a scouting action by the Russians

Then, around 5 pm, a new attack took place, this time on the road to St. Petersburg: it was the general vanguard under Helfreich, which was ordered to go to Polotsk from Ropno (or Ropna), repelling enemy outposts. He met the 3rd brigade of the Bavarian division von Wrede. The fighting will last three hours and will have as stake, the village of Prismenitsa and the woods in the north of this village. On the Russian side, they will be led by the 25th and 26th Jäger regiments. Helfreich acknowledged a hundred killed and wounded on his side and estimated that he had taken a hundred prisoners to the Bavarians. The outposts of Verdier (near Gamzelovo) were also attacked. They had pushed back the Russians but General Verdier was wounded in the evening. Some sources wrote that

Whoever replaced General Verdier at the head of the 8th division for the first battle of Polotsk is uncertain. It seems that it was General Valentin (commander of a brigade of this division), himself badly wounded on August 18th and which will then be replaced by Genberal Maison (commander a brigade of the division

Legrand). What is sure is that General Maison was made general de division on the 21st of August, and at that date, he will command the 8th division.

Placed on the Napoleon Series: February 20