

# The Napoleon Series

## The Campaign of 1814: Chapter 19, Part II

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# THE CAMPAIGN OF 1814

(after the documents of the imperial and royal archives of Vienna)

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## THE ALLIED CAVALRY

DURING THE CAMPAIGN OF 1814

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### CHAPTER XIX.

OPERATIONS IN BELGIUM AND NORTHERN FRANCE, FROM 3 MARCH UNTIL THE TERMINATION OF HOSTILITIES

**Reconnaissances of Schönberg and Hellwig on Lannoy and Tourcoing.** --But on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March the Duke of Saxe-Weimar received at the same time the news of the victory of Laon<sup>1</sup> and the arrival at Brussels of the reinforcements which General Lieutenant von Thielmann brought him from Saxony. Instead of immediately resuming the offensive, he preferred to wait for the reinforcements to come into the line and devote a few days to the

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<sup>1</sup>On the 13<sup>th</sup>, the commander of the Prussian outposts in front of Kortrijk had sent the following to the French outposts: "Monsieur le Comrade,

"It was not long ago that you had the goodness to not withhold making some little relating for victories that the French army must have won. I have the honor to announce with the greatest pleasure that His Excellency Marshal Blücher has just won a complete victory over the French army commanded by the Emperor of the French, on the 9<sup>th</sup>, at Laon. Sir, I have the honor to be..."

PONGE, Officer of the Outpost.

*(Archives of the War.)*

reorganization of his army. However, as there continued to be reports of French reassembling at Lannoy and Roubaix, that one was afraid was new offensive movements of Maison, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, before he gave General Borstell the order to try in the night of the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup>, a surprise on Roubaix, charged Major Hellwig and Colonel Prince Schönberg to reconnoiter the posts of Tourcoing and Lannoy on the morning of 13 March, and to seek from obtaining positive information on the position, the intentions of the French.

Colonel Prince Schönberg drove from Watrelos a small French post, which retreated to Roubaix, where the division of Barrois was in position.

The reconnaissance of Hellwig had been moved on Tourcoing, but without committing. Maison, who at the first moment had believed it a serious attack, ordered Watrelos reoccupied, and the following of the retreat of the Allied reconnaissances, when they returned to Saint-Léger.

Although these movements would have yielded no results, and would have only made it possible to establish the presence of the Barrois Division at Roubaix, the poor condition of the roads and the impossibility of having the troops accompany their artillery persuaded the Duke of Saxe-Weimar to renounce the coup de main planned on Roubaix.

**16 March. --Positions of the army of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar after the arrival of the reinforcements. -- Distribution of the troops charged to operate against Maubeuge.** --Joined on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> by the Saxons of Thielmann,<sup>2</sup> and now having 27,000 men, 3,200 horses, and 45 guns, the commander of the III<sup>rd</sup> Corps of the Confederation resolved to comply without delay with the orders sent by the headquarters of the Army of Silesia and, in order to facilitate the operation which he was about to undertake against Maubeuge, he assigned to his army corps the following positions:

General von Ryssel, in charge of watching Condé and Valenciennes, and covering Mons with four Saxon battalions, four squadrons of Pomeranian hussars, and a horse battery, guarded the right bank of the Hayne on the side of Condé, occupied Quiévrain, and established the bulk of his people at Saint-Ghislain. On his left, General von Borstell (10 battalions, 9 squadrons and 16 guns) was quartered at Bavay, thus masking Valenciennes and Le Quesnoy, and observing Landrecies by a few troops stationed at Pont-sur-Sambre. Still further to the left, the bulk of the Saxon division of General Lecoq (6 and a half battalions, 3 squadrons, and 24 pieces, of which 12 were heavy caliber and 12 were siege), was in charge of the operations against Maubeuge.<sup>3</sup> General Lecoq was also ordered to leave a battalion and a squadron at Beaumont to cover the blockade of Maubeuge on the side of Philippeville. Finally, the Russian Colonel Nasakyn, stationed at Avesnes, was watching Landrecies.

On his right, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar had entrusted to the Lieutenant General von Thielmann, detached at Tournay with ten battalions, four squadrons and seventeen guns, the task of immobilizing the French troops which Maison had brought back under Lille. The flying corps of Hellwig, which covered the right and occupied Kortrijk and Menin, was momentarily left at the disposal of General von Thielmann, as well as the Cossacks of Bihalov I, posted at Ghent, and the party of Major Pückler, established in Bruges.

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<sup>2</sup>Composition of the reinforcements brought by Thielmann and Major General de Brause: 1 squadron of cuirassiers, 3 battalions of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Landwehr, 2 battalions of Anhalt-Dessau-Köthen sent from Brussels to Tournai, 1 battalion of line and 3 battalions of landwehr, which were directed to Mons. Finally, the Landwehr battalion of Schwarzburg, which remained, in principle, at Brussels.

<sup>3</sup>The troops of Lecoq, in charge of the operations on Maubeuge, were divided as follows: on the right bank of the Sambre, four battalions of Saxon infantry, three of grenadiers, a squadron of cuirassiers, and all the artillery; on the left bank of the Sambre, 2 1/2 battalions and 2 squadrons.

Nothing was changed to the disposition of the second-line troops; three battalions of Landwehr continued to form the garrison of Brussels, and the detachment of General-Major von Gablenz, stationed at Malines, connected with the English of Graham, and assured them of the blockade of Antwerp.<sup>4</sup>

The plan conceived by the Duke of Saxe-Weimar was all the more inexplicable, since the possession of Maubeuge could not assure him any real advantage. Masters of Avesnes since the beginning of February, the Allies could, just by avoiding Maubeuge, communicate freely and easily from Belgium to Champagne. For nearly six weeks they had been using the Mons-Avesnes-La Capelle-Vervins road, without, for want of people in Quesnoy, Landrecies and Maubeuge, this communication ever being seriously disturbed. Finally, as the information furnished by two customs officers (duoniers) of the deserters confirmed the information already possessed by the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, since he knew almost positively that the garrison of Maubeuge consisted at the most of a thousand customs officers, conscripts and national guards, and that the place was incapable of supporting a siege, it was evidently contrary to all the true principles of employing the division of Lecoq against this place, to divert the troops of Generals Borstell and Ryssel from active operations, and to immobilize them by ordering them to watch Condé, Valenciennes, and Landrecies.

**Situation of Maison.** --A dispatch of Maison to Clarke, dated the 16<sup>th</sup> of March, in which the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps exposed the smallness of his resources, makes it possible to give an exact account of the results which the Duke of Saxe-Weimar might have obtained, if he had persevered in an offensive which he immediately renounced after he had taken it, and if instead of disseminating his forces he had taken advantage of the arrival of his reinforcements to vigorously push the handful of men to the front from which Maison had tried to give the hand to the garrison of Antwerp. "In spite of the danger which the northern towns run, by depriving them of the few troops I had left behind," Maison wrote to the Minister,<sup>5</sup> "my observations having failed to destroy the orders which His Majesty gave for the reunion at my corps, I have drawn from Valenciennes a battalion of the 75<sup>th</sup>, which will arrive on the 17<sup>th</sup> at Lille. There is only one battalion of the 72<sup>nd</sup> left in this place, which I should also withdraw; 500 men of the 25<sup>th</sup>, who were at Landrecies and Quesnoy, were to march on the 19<sup>th</sup> to be at Lille on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Thus these two towns were reduced to 150 garrison men each. Landrecies having only 1500 souls, the population offers little resources for the defense of this place, situated on the major communication line of the enemy. I have no doubt that the Allies, missing their invasion of Paris, will not return to more regular operations, and do not begin to secure towns which interfere with their communications, and whose possession, in any event, would enable them to withdraw with safety and establish the theater of war in the Netherlands."

After informing the Minister of the preparations made by the Allies for the attack on the fortresses, Maison, rectifying the situation of his corps on the 14<sup>th</sup>, wrote that "the Barrois Division had only 95 officers and 2,742 men under arms; the cavalry of Castex, 48 officers and 832 horses." And he added: "The division of Solignac, which I begin to organize, amounts in all to 1404 men."

"The difficulties I have announced to Your Excellency that I thought I would experience in removing from the depots of the 16<sup>th</sup> Division the men moved on the states as available, have been realized. We are far from the result we were hoping for. The 55<sup>th</sup>, which was to supply 500 men, sent only 100 who are neither dressed nor equipped. They are without coats or wearing a white vest. General Brenier-Montmorand has warned me that the majority of men received from the depots would be in the same situation, given the state of shortages at these depots. Your

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<sup>4</sup>If we add to the troops of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar and Graham the Swedish army cantoned from Aachen to Liège and the corps of Lieutenant-General Wallmoden who had just arrived from Bremen, the total effectives of the Allied troops in the Netherlands at that time amounted to more than 60,000 men and 9,500 horses, disposing of 170 guns.

<sup>5</sup>Maison to the Minister of War, Roubaix, 16 March 1814. (*Archives of the War.*)

At that time Maison had not yet received the dispatch which Clarke addressed to him on the 14<sup>th</sup>, and in which the Minister of War confined himself to informing him that "the observations relating to the difficulties presented by the organization of his army corps and the resulting consequences for the defense of the towns were so important that he thought it his duty to send this letter to the Emperor." (Minister of War at the General Maison, Paris, 14 March; *Archives of the War.*)

Excellency knows that it is impossible to place soldiers who have neither a capote nor equipment into the field, and I ask him to send a thousand capotes to Lille."

**17-18 March. --Sortie of the garrison of Antwerp. --Movement of Lecoq towards Maubeuge.** --The movements of the various corps of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar would, moreover, once again put Maison in the impossible situation of conforming to the Emperor's orders and preventing him from adding to the composition of his troops, the few fractions he intended to extract from Valenciennes, Landrecies, and Quesnoy. Whilst the garrison of Antwerp was again menacing on the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup>, the blockading troops of General von Gablenz, to the point of compelling this general officer to call upon his reserve at Mechelen, General Lecoq had begun his movement on Maubeuge. He left in the morning from Mons, and stopped that evening at Merbes-le-Château, and occupied with his advanced troops Grand-Reng, Erquelines, and Jeumont, in order to secure possession of the bridge of the Sambre.

Continuing on 18 March his movement on Maubeuge, on both banks of the Sambre, Lecoq stopped the main body of siege at Recquignies and Boussois, caused throwing between these two villages flying bridges over the river and established his outposts at Cerfontaine, Rousies and Assevent. Clearly exaggerating the strength of the garrison of Maubeuge,<sup>6</sup> thinking that the French were to occupy the former entrenched camp at Rousies, created at the first siege in 1793, and the heights of Assevent, where they showed only patrols, Lecoq used the days of 19 and 20 March to reconnoiter the approaches and advances of the town and began the preparatory work for a regular siege by making fascines and gabions in the woods of Rousies.

**19-24 March. --Siege of Maubeuge.** --On the 19<sup>th</sup> he pushed his outposts from Cerfontaine to Ferrières-la-Grande on the right bank of the Sambre, and sent a reconnaissance to Hautmont to determine the location of a bridge and to seek to connect it with the column of Borstell, which was to observe Valenciennes, Le Quesnoy and Landrecies from Bavay.

On the 20<sup>th</sup>, it became clear that it would be impossible to build a bridge at Hautmont. The Duke of Saxe-Weimar rejoined Lecoq and assumed responsibility for the operations. Until that moment Colonel Schouller, compelled to spare the few troops at his disposal, had confined himself to skirmishing with the Saxon outposts and keeping them in suspense.

On the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, Colonel Schouller, seeing that the Saxons were approaching on all sides of the fortress, attacked their outposts on the side of Assevent, and even obliged Lecoq to have them supported by troops from the right bank of the Sambre.

In the course of the day of the 21 March the three Prussian battalions of Major Klinkowström rejoined the siege; this officer, who had just set out for the corps of Bülow in France, had in fact found at Beaumont the order of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, enjoining him to proceed from that city to Cerfontaine, and informing him that, he would resume his movement only after the end of the siege of Maubeuge. Arranging to leave from that moment, of 9 battalions concentrated on the right bank of the Sambre in the neighborhood of Ferrières-la-Grande, with 7 companies and a squadron posted in observation on the left bank, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, brought the troops of the right bank near the town, and occupied, without a blow, the camp of Rousies, which completely dominates the town.

In the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup>, one pressed the work of establishing and armament of the three batteries of siege; that from the attacks on the left, placed south of the road from Maubeuge to Beaumont at the height of the first houses on

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<sup>6</sup> The slowness of the march of Lecoq enabled Colonel Schouller to complete the necessary preparations and to report to the Maison on the projects of the Allies. On the 18<sup>th</sup>, the Colonel had informed Maison that the Allies, on their way to Maubeuge, had with them mortars, large-caliber cannons, tools and ladders capable of carrying six men in front and that the enemy would attempt a coup de main after bombarding the city. He added that he was not afraid of a coup de main, "but that the town was incapable of withstanding a siege in good order," and, not being able to count on the National Guard, he begged the General-in-Chief not to withdraw anyone from Maubeuge and to send him reinforcement. (Colonel Schouller, commander at Maubeuge, to Maison, Maubeuge, 18 March, and Maison to the Minister, Lille, 19 March; *Archives of the War*.)

the outskirts of the square, was to receive 6 English mortars and 2 pieces of 12. For the battery of the center, which was to be established to the north of this road and armed with 8 pieces of 12 pounds, one used the remains of an ancient redoubt. In front of this battery and at a short distance from the crest of the glacis, one had arranged platforms and shoulders for 2 mortars. Finally, for the site of the battery on the right, to which four English 24-pounder guns had been assigned, the ditches of one of the old works had been chosen.

The garrison, who had not sought to menace the workers during the night, made a sortie from the gate of France on the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Supported by the artillery fire from the town, it drove the guards from the trenches before them and returned to Maubeuge only in the afternoon. Colonel Schouller had at the same time caused the Saxon posts on the left bank of the Sambre, on the Assevent side, to be disturbed, and the almost uninterrupted firing of his artillery greatly delayed and retarded the works of the besiegers, until the night.

In order to be able to secure themselves with the help of the heavy caliber pieces, the commander of the III<sup>rd</sup> Corps of the Confederation, resolved to establish, on the left of the redoubt and the battery at the center, shoulders for the 2 howitzers originally intended for the left battery. The Duke of Saxe-Weimar also ordered General von Borstell, whose main body was on the side of Bavay, to relieve the Saxon post of Hautmont, and to guard the bridge there.

As early as the 20<sup>th</sup>, Colonel Nasakyn had, on the orders of the commander of the III<sup>rd</sup> Corps of the Confederation, tested Landrecies and left a post at Maroilles before returning to Avesnes on the 21<sup>st</sup>. Moreover, in order to compensate for the numerical insufficiency of his cavalry, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, informed by Colonel Nasakyn of the presence between Beaumont and Philippeville of the Cossack regiment of Rebrevé II showing from blockade of Wesel, had sent to this regiment the order to rejoin him immediately.

On 23 March, at four o'clock in the morning, the siege batteries opened fire, and commenced the bombardment, although a total of 1624 rounds were fired, or about 90 shots per piece. The town which during the first hours had neglected to reply, returned violently from 6 o'clock, and at 9 o'clock in the morning the battery in the center, where the storehouse containing 140 bombs had just blown up, was reduced to silence, and almost completely destroyed. The two other batteries exposed to the fire of the 26 pieces of Colonel Schouller continued to fire until the evening, but with so little success that the Duke of Saxe-Weimar renounced the continuation of the bombardment. In the presence of the resolute attitude of the garrison, it would have been foolish to attempt the escalation, and although there was scarcely any hope of any acceptance of a capitulation, however honorable it might be the Duke of Saxe-Weimar sent to Colonel Schouller a negotiator, who reported the reply which the commander of the III<sup>rd</sup> Corps had expected.

On the evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup> the Saxons ceased fire and took advantage of the night to disarm their batteries, and on the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> the troops of Lecoq, who had covered the retreat of the siege on Beaumont and Mons, returned to the positions of Saint Ghislain which they had occupied on the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Having left the town at eight in the morning, with 500 men and 30 horses, Colonel Schouller had driven out the Saxon rear-guard from Ferrières-la-Grande.

After having authorized Major von Klinkowström to resume on the following day the movement which he had caused him to interrupt twice, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar returned to his side at Mons, and charged Generals Lecoq and Ryssel, who had only left at Saint Ghislain a battalion, three squadrons, and a section of horse artillery, to secure the blockade of Maubeuge until further notice.

On the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup>, the Saxon troops occupied the right bank of the Sambre, Ferrières-la-Petite, Ferrières-la-Grande, Rousies, Recquignies, and Beaumont and Solre-le-Château; on the left bank, Assevent, Boussois and Élesmes. The Cossacks flanked the right of their lines on the side of Mairieux and Bettignies, illuminating the front of the position of Lecoq, and watched from afar the work of repair which Colonel Schouller had commissioned immediately after the retreat of the besiegers.

**19 March. --Situation of Maison. --Malcontent of the Crown Prince of Sweden.** --While these events were taking place on the left of the Allied lines, as soon as he had seen the Saxons pronounce their movement towards Maubeuge and Borstell take charge of the observation of Quesnoy, Valenciennes, and Condé, Maison, justly anxious about the feeble defenses of these types of towns sent back to Valenciennes the battalion which he had withdrawn,

and had the battalion from Landrecies and Quesnoy, who had been ordered to rejoin the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps of the army, enter Maubeuge. At that time the total strength of the infantry of this corps was about 4,500 men, the battalion from whom he requested taking away to be sent back to Valenciennes, and the 1,500 men whom Maison should have left at Lille, that were removed from this town. Under these conditions, and above all because of the little value of the few troops<sup>7</sup> he had at his disposal, Maison could not but remain temporarily on his positions at Lille and Roubaix.

Before we deal with the operations that General Thielmann, after relieving Borstell at Tournay, was not long in beginning, we must also point out an important political event, a fact which has often been contested and whose clear proof comes from a dispatch which Maison sent on 20 March from Lille to the Chief of Staff and the Minister of War. We want to talk about the attitude of Bernadotte. It will be remembered that we have had occasion to insist in Chapter XII on the suspicion which the delays of the Crown Prince of Sweden had inspired in Bülow, on the sending and presence at Liège, at the headquarters of that Prince, of an agent of King Joseph, M. de Franzemberg, on the tension of the relations between Blücher and the commander of the Army of the North, on the discontent which Bernadotte had caused in the departure for France of the two corps of Bülow and Winzingerode, detached from his army, and added to the Army of Silesia, and which had also increased the destination reserve for the corps of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, who had also been ordered to rejoin Blücher. It will also be remembered that we have reproduced the letter of 18 March, in which the Crown Prince of Sweden, protesting against these proceedings, first as a general, then as representing a king and an Allied nation, had formally declared that "put, by the deprivation of these three corps, in the impossibility of making any useful movement, it would remain, pending the execution of the treaties, on the position which the Swedish army occupied since the 4<sup>th</sup> of March."<sup>8</sup>

The Duke of Saxe-Weimar also shared the ideas and distrust of Bülow. He believed in the existence of regular relations between the Crown Prince of Sweden and his former aide-de-camp, the commander of the French troops of the North. He had been told of many comings and goings between the Swedish headquarters at Liège and the lines of Maison, and the sending to this general of Benjamin Constant. It is true that one had to be careful of declaring, both General Dornenberg and the German officers attached to the staff of the Prince Royal of Sweden, as well as to the young prince of Croÿ-Solre, that the Duke of Saxe-Weimar had detached from Bernadotte specifically to be informed of what was happening at Liège, that they were trying to decide if Maison would betray the cause of the

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<sup>7</sup> In his dispatch to the Minister of War, dated 19 March, Maison, after having made informed him of the positions and forces of his adversaries, after having demonstrated to him that the Allies had a large army in front of the frontier of the North, "where we do not even have enough to put a garrison in the towns," made a sad picture of his situation.

"The measure of removing available men from the depots," he wrote to him, "produces nothing; 500 to 600 men have already arrived here from the 28<sup>th</sup>, 43<sup>rd</sup>, 46<sup>th</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup>. There are not 200 able to enter the campaign. All the others are absolutely naked, without shoes, without cartridge pouches. They are almost all isolated persons belonging to different army corps and have been incorporated into the depots of this division. Many of them are weak, sickly and unable to serve. I am not speaking of the desertion which took place on their way to their depot at Lille. It follows from this statement, which is only too true, and from the measure which I have taken to reinforce the garrisons at Maubeuge and Valenciennes, that I shall not be able to organize a line infantry division of six battalions."

"I repeat to Your Excellency that we can no longer rely on the urban National Guards. All the commanders say so. The dominant character of the public mind in this country is the apathy and absolute absence of all French, noble, and generous sentiments. This country is resigned to everything. It does not wait for the enemy as a liberator. But it will bear the yoke and will not do anything to avoid this misfortune. All the conscripts of these departments, who are in the corps, even of the Guard, desert in a frightful manner. In a single artillery company of the Barrois Division, there are up to 23 deserters. And yet these troops have never lacked anything since I commanded them. What is most incredible is that the greater part of these deserters pass over to the enemy, something unheard of in our years since the wars of the Revolution." (Maison to the Minister of War, Lille, 19 March, *Archives of the War*.)

<sup>8</sup>Crown Prince of Sweden to Field-Marshal Blücher, Liège, 18 March.

Emperor and to pass to the Allies. Without wishing to go so far as to claim, as Marmont did,<sup>9</sup> that the Crown Prince of Sweden had seriously thought of tearing up the treaties binding him to the Coalition, and of returning his arms against the Prussian and Federal troops employed in Belgium, it is nevertheless certain that Bernadotte's displeasure might perhaps have been availed upon by flattering his ambition, by listening to his overtures, and endeavoring to guess what were his inner most thoughts, his secret desires. A dispatch from Maison, too interesting not to be reproduced *in extenso*, will, moreover, give an exact idea of the state of mind of the Crown Prince of Sweden:

"I have the honor to report to your Highness," he wrote to the Chief of Staff, and to the Minister of War, on 20 March,<sup>10</sup> "that a Swedish officer brought the 19<sup>th</sup> to the outposts of Ypres 40 prisoners French of different grades, which His Royal Highness the Prince of Sweden released on parole. It appears from the declaration of several generals returned, that the Swedish officer would have wished to enter into negotiations to establish an exchange. He went on, recommending very much to these Gentlemen the request contained in the letter of General Spaar, handed to the commander of Ypres."

"From all that the prisoners have to say, *the Crown Prince of Sweden seems to be in a disposition from which His Majesty might profit by detaching himself from the cause of the Coalition.* If one establishes the intercourse which this Prince has demanded, it would be possible to make him make direct propositions, which would probably have a favorable result. The Prince is displeased with the Allies; he accuses them of not having fulfilled the engagements contracted reciprocally. A great distrust and even misunderstanding prevailed between him and the Duke of Saxe-Weimar. The Swedish officer was charged, in case he did not wish to let the prisoners pass, to ask the Duke for his refusal in writing, and to declare that *if they were opposed to their return to France the Prince would send a detachment to make them pass by force, and would fire upon the troops of any power which would oppose his dispositions.*"

"*After having strongly pronounced himself against the project of re-establishing the Bourbons in France, the Prince urged all the prisoners to die with the Emperor, rather than suffer under the most degraded family ever to ascend the throne; advising them to insurge in their provinces to reject this new project of the Allies.* In conversation the Prince also told these officers that he was at Liege with all his troops, and that he would come out only in good circumstances.

"I have thought it my duty to enter into these details by the importance which I conceive that we may attach *to the dispositions which the Prince of Sweden so openly manifests.*"

"M. de Franzemberg, whom I have succeeded in passing through the enemy outposts by deceiving the Prussian general, Borstell, on the object of his journey, has already made known to me on his return something of the dispositions of the Prince of Sweden. What the officers are saying now confirms to me in the opinion that direct and official openings of His Majesty would complete the detachment of Sweden, which must begin to feel that things have gone too far for their own safety."

Under these conditions, now that the Allies were preparing to undertake serious operations on the right, Maison<sup>11</sup> might have decided to march on Valenciennes and Maubeuge if the Allies had not threatened Ypres and if he had not been aware of the concentration of the Saxons of Thielmann and the flying corps of Hellwig at Kortrijk and Tournay. In any case, and even if Thielmann had remained on the defensive, the impossibility of drawing anything from the towns, the more than insufficient clothing and equipment of the men from the depots, the slowness brought by the authorities to the organization of the urban National Guards and their evil spirit, the lack of gunners, drivers and horses which had only allowed him to harness twenty-three pieces,<sup>12</sup> would have prevented Maison from resuming to the campaign.

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<sup>9</sup>Marmont, *Memoires*, VII.

<sup>10</sup>Maison to the Chief of Staff and the Minister of War, Lille, 20 March. (*Archives of the War.*)

<sup>11</sup>Maison to the Minister of War, Situation to the 20<sup>th</sup> of March, Lille, 21 March. (*Archives of the War.*)

<sup>12</sup>*Id. in ibid.*

**21 March. --Offensive reconnaissance of Thielmann on Lille. --Combat of Bouvines.** --In fact, while Borstell left Tournay on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March, and was going to settle at Bavay and Pont-sur-Sambre to support operations against Maubeuge by demonstrations against Valenciennes and Le Quesnoy, Thielmann, who occupied Tournay with 10 Battalions, 4 squadrons, and 17 guns, had resolved to take advantage of the forced immobility of Maison to execute, with the assistance of the flying corps of Hellwig, charged to act on his right, a great offensive reconnaissance and forage for fodder to the gates of Lille.

Leaving only the troops strictly necessary to ensure the service of the outposts on the Kortrijk side, the protection of the pontoon bridge of Hérinnes and the guard of Tournay, Thielmann formed, on 21 March, his division into three columns. That of the right, under the command of Colonel Prince Schönberg, had the mission of reaching the banks of the Marque at the level of Chéreng; that of the center, led by Major von Francis, was directed towards Bouvines, and served as a support to the right column; that of the left, stronger than the other two, and placed under the command of General-Major von Brause, was to be assembled at 10 o'clock in the morning at Rumes, ready to advance as soon as it received the order; 100 requisitioned carts escorted by two companies from the garrison of Tournay, and parked near the roads of Orchies and Saint-Amand-les-Eaux, were to accompany the columns.

Colonel Prince Schönberg, who had followed to Chéreng the high road of Lille, re-established the bridge, which he entrusted to his infantry, and crossed over the Marque with his hussars, to whom he recommended pushing on Lille, in defending however, against seriously engaging. In accordance with the instructions of Maison, the French posts retreated without fighting against the outposts of the reserves placed at Hellemmes and Lézinnes. Made more enterprising by the progress of his hussars, who encountered all the less resistance as Hellwig had shown himself almost at the same moment north of Lille and had menaced the post that Maison had established at the Pont Rouge to communicate with Ypres and the pickets of the Écluses and of Quesnoy-sur-Deûle, Colonel Prince Schönberg, infringing on the orders of Thielmann, pushed his cavalry to a short distance from the suburb of Fives. This inconsiderate point, --which Thielmann calls *an excess of bravery* in his report, --the uncertainty and divergence of the Allied movements, proved to Maison that they had no other object than to divert his attention from his right or to make a grand reconnaissance on him. He soon assembled his right at the village of Sainghin, threatened the flanks and rear of the troops of Colonel Schönberg, while another French column, chasing before it the Saxon cavalry, threw them on Pont-à-Tressin and Anstaing, and pursued them vigorously onto the banks of the Marque.

The second Saxon column, posted at Bouvines, had sent some reinforcements to the column on the right. But attacked itself on its right by the French troops coming out of the village of Sainghin, which the Saxons had vainly attempted to capture, worried by another detachment which, coming from Fretin and Péronne, was trying to outflank his left, Major von Francis had to abandon Bouvines to French. The cavalry of Maison, crossing the Marque by ford and swimming, then pursued the troops of Schönberg as far as Baisieux, where the first column bivouacked, and as far as Cysoing those of Major von Francois, who stopped at Bourghelles, where they passed the night.

The third column had, during this time, been directed by Orchies on Le Pont-à-Marcq, where it had had an insignificant engagement with a battalion of the 75<sup>th</sup> and 200 horses; it returned on the evening of the 21<sup>st</sup> to Orchies.

To the north of Lille, the cavalymen of Hellwig, who had shown themselves during the day at Bondues and Marcq-en-Barœul, had near the latter place, come up against a post of 300 men, and resumed the road at Menin .

On 22 March all of the troops of Thielmann returned to their former positions around Tournay, and the outposts of the French were established at Orchies.<sup>13</sup>

From that moment, Maison was determined to resume the offensive. He proposed, as he wrote to the Minister, to march on the corps of Hellwig, who was on the Lily, at Menin, to recommence his offensive operations on the 24<sup>th</sup>, and to seek again to give a hand of the garrison of Antwerp.

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<sup>13</sup>Maison to the Minister of War, Lille, 22 March. (*Archives of the War.*)

**Sortie of the garrison from Antwerp.** --While the Duke of Saxe-Weimar and Thielmann failed in their undertakings on Maubeuge and Lille, the Antwerp garrison had not remained inactive. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of March, at five o'clock in the morning, Carnot had brought troops out of the fortress, ascending the left bank of the Scheldt, and, supported by a flotilla of eight ships, pushed as far as Rupelmonde.

**23-24 March. --Preparations of Maison. --Sortie of the garrison of Antwerp.** --Reassured about the fate of Maubeuge, seeing that his adversaries, though possessing considerable forces, acted without a fixed plan, and contented themselves with observing Antwerp and the towns of the frontier of the north, informed by a dispatch from Colonel Geismar, which had been succeeded in being intercepted, that the Duke of Saxe-Weimar had carried the greater part of his army towards Maubeuge, and stripped his right, Maison, feeling more than ever the necessity of effecting his junction with the Roguet Division, hastened to take the last measures necessary for taking up the campaign and tried to deceive the Duke of Saxe-Weimar by announcing everywhere that he was going to march forward to disengage Maubeuge.

In order to give the Allies a better chance of falling for the concealing of his plans, hiding from them the real direction of his march and the purpose of the movements which he proposed to execute, Maison had invited Carnot to draw upon him the attention of the Duke of Saxe Weimar. After the march of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March, the line of the outposts of Graham and of Gablenz, the garrison of Antwerp pushed on the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> a sortie in the direction of Lier, jostled the post of Kontich seriously enough to oblige again General von Gablenz to direct troops of Mechelen on Duffel and Waarloos.

**25 March. --Maison takes Menin and Kortrijk. --False measures taken by the Duke of Saxe-Weimar and by Thielmann.** --On the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup>, Maison had completed his last preparations, resupplied his operational troops and organized his bridge equipment. Leaving Lille unexpectedly with a little over 5,000 men, 1,100 horses and 20 guns,<sup>14</sup> he drove the outposts of Hellwig from Roncq, attacked and overwhelmed the bulk of the flying corps at Menin, and seized that town. Then, without allowing the Prussian major time to breathe, he entered on his heels at Kortrijk, and pursued him on the road to Oudenaarde, while his vanguard entered the road to Ghent, and stopped, the 25<sup>th</sup> in the evening, at Saint-Éloy-Vive.

Even before being expelled from Menin, Hellwig had been quick to give the alarm to General von Thielmann and to let him know that, according to him, Maison seemed to want to threaten Brussels. The Saxon general had at once given to General von Brause the order to try to disengage Hellwig by pushing a reconnaissance on Lille. Thanks to this demonstration, which had no effect, Thielmann hoped that Maison would come back and gain the time he needed to concentrate his forces during the night, which he had committed the fault of disseminating.

Transmitted immediately to the head-quarters of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, at Mons, the news of the departure of Maison from Lille caused him less uneasiness because he thought he had completely protected the points towards which the French general seemed to want to head.

It was believed that Thielmann was perfectly in a position to stand alone against Maison, and as the second column of Saxon troops had been brought in by Colonel von Seydewitz,<sup>15</sup> and had arrived a few days before in Brussels, instead of letting it continue on Mons, the first echelon of this column was ordered to halt, on the evening of the 25<sup>th</sup>, at Braine-le-Comte and Soignies, while the second echelon, headed straight for Enghien.

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<sup>14</sup>"I mounted my horse," wrote Maison to the Minister, " on the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> from Lille. My troops are marching on Kortrijk. Tomorrow, the 26<sup>th</sup>, I shall approach Ghent, unless I find too great a force. I hope in three days to communicate with Antwerp. I have no doubt that my communications with Lille will be cut off today. Your Excellency will receive no news from me until I have returned to the line of towns."

The small operating corps of the House consisted of the divisions of Barrois and Solignac and the cavalry of General Castex.

<sup>15</sup>Composition of Colonel von Seydewitz: 7 battalions of infantry, 1 squadron of hussars, a battery of 12, and the artillery park, representing a total strength of 6,300 men, 778 horses and 8 cannons.

**26 March. --Occupation of Ghent and movements towards Antwerp.** --Without losing a minute, and without leaving Hellwig and Thielmann time to reconnoiter and see clearly in to his play, Maison left from Kortrijk the 26<sup>th</sup> before dawn; moving by a forced march by Deinze on Ghent, he arrived at two o'clock in the afternoon at the gates of that city. Warned of the approach of the French column by his outposts, which Maison had been driven out of Deinze, Colonel Bihalov I, who had with him only 150 to 200 Cossacks, a piece of four and the nucleus of a Belgian regiment, tried to hold on to Ghent. The infantry of General Penne had little difficulty in breaking this semblance of resistance. A few squadrons of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lancers pursued the Cossacks on the road from Aalst to Melle, seized the piece of four, and brought back a hundred prisoners, among whom were Colonel Polis, and most of the officers of the Belgian regiment.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Maison to the Minister, Ghent, 26 March, and Lille, 1 April. (*Archives of the War.*)

The capture of Ghent and the captivity of Colonel Polis gave rise, a few days later, to an exchange of letters so curious between the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, General Thielmann and General Maison, that we think it useful to reproduce here the four Letters whose originals are in the *Archives of the War.*

In order to regulate the situation of Colonel Polis, General Thielmann had begun by addressing to Maison the following letter:

" Lieutenant-General Baron von Thielmann to General Count Maison."

"Oudenaarde, 29 March 1814. --Monsieur le Comte, having learned that the commandant of the Belgian regiment formed at Ghent has fallen into the hands of Your Excellency, I have the honor to ask him to please see to him and treat him as prisoner of war."

"I have to inform him that in case this does not happen, I am authorized to act with all possible retaliation."

"Please accept, Monsieur le Comte, the assurances of the highest consideration, with which I have the honor to be, Your Excellency,"

"The very humble and very obedient servant."

"The Lieutenant-General Baron von Thielmann."

This letter, all the more unbecoming and arrogant as Thielmann had served in the ranks of the French army beside Maison, earned him the following answer on the same day:

"Ghent, 29 March 1814."

"General of Division Count Maison to Lieutenant-General Baron von Thielmann."

"Monsieur le Baron, Your officer has handed me the letter you sent me."

"Mr. Polis was treated like any other prisoner-of-war officer."

"If I had executed the laws of the Emperor, your reclamation, mister General, would have reached me too late. Feelings of humanity have prevented me from taking any part in regard to him."

"I have every reason to think that, whatever may be the fate of Mr. Polis in the future, you will feel that reprisals exerted on some of our officers could only bring about similar effects on those of the powers of the Allies that are in ours."

"Accept, Monsieur the Baron, the assurance of my highest consideration."

"Count MAISON."

Immediately after his entry into Ghent, Maison, informed of the presence of Allied couriers between Lochristi and Lokeren, sent a detachment of fifty horses and an infantry company to Antwerp under the command of Colonel Villatte; this officer, whose duty it was to open communication with Antwerp, was to hand General Roguet the last instructions of the commander-in-chief.<sup>17</sup>

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Finally, on the same day, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar also felt the need to intercede in favor of the city of Ghent and to try to intimidate Maison by threats as useless as they were displaced:

"The Duke of Saxe-Weimar, General-in-Chief at the service of His Imperial Majesty of all the Russias, to the General of Division, Count Maison, Brussels, 29 March 1814."

"If you do violence to the inhabitants of the city of Ghent and the country, I promise you that you will be informed as soon as possible of the retaliation which the Emperor of all the Russias will cause to be executed on the general and superior officers who are in great numbers in his power."

"I have the honor to present my tributes."

Instead of replying directly to the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, Maison replied to General Wallmoden, who had sent him a little chivalrous warning, which was not very in keeping with the rules of war which the commander of the IIIrd Corps of the Confederation had thought necessary to give to a general of France. The son of the peasants of Épinay was to show more tact and more greatness of soul than the German prince, and the reply he addressed the following day to Wallmoden, painted the firm and loyal character of Maison:

"General Count Maison to Count Wallmoden, Lieutenant-General in the service of Russia."

"Kortrijk, 30 March 1814.

"Monsieur le Comte, I have received your letter and that of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar which it contained. Threats only scare cowards and are misplaced among us."

"The inhabitants of Ghent, who have fallen into my power, will be treated like the Emperor Napoleon, my master, their sole and legitimate sovereign, orders, regardless of the reprisals threatened on the French officers in the hands of the Allies."

"In this war of extermination we have made, there is not one of us who prefers death to the yoke and above all to leave to enemies the right to insult us."

"Receive, Monsieur le Comte, the assurance of my highest consideration."

"General Count Maison."

<sup>17</sup>Maison to the Minister, Gand, 26 March, and Lille, 1 April. (*Archives of the War.*)