



The mystery of the 17th of
October 1813

The Theme of October 17

- “It will probably never be understood why Napoleon remained inactive this day, why he did not undertake to withdraw through Weissenfels, behind the Salle, or why he did not choose to strike the principal allied army. Much of it could be tied to the need to resupply his forces with munitions. He knew that the armies of Bernadotte, Bennigsen and Colloredo were about to join the allies, yet he remained inactive and allowed the allies to receive 100,000 reinforcements.”
- George Nafziger, *Napoleon at Leipzig*, 1996, p. 189

F.A. Thiers, *History of the Consulate and the Empire of France under Napoleon*

- No circumstance in this campaign has occasioned more controversy than the existence of only one bridge to effect the retreat from Leipzig. Writers whose ordinary theme is that in his whole life Napoleon was never guilty of an error or an omission profess that he ordered Berthier to throw several bridges either above or below that of Lindenau and that Berthier failed to execute this important order—Berthier who never neglected even the most trivial detail.
- FN p. 536, online version—Phila., John Highlands, 1893

Why were not numerous bridges built over the Pleisse and the Elster?

- It is certain none were constructed, and, so far, no orders for them have ever been discovered. As Marbot says, "the entire Army assumed this had been done." They didn't realize that no orders could be issued, because the pontonniers and artisans were not present. Napoleon was waiting for his pontoons and his war chest to arrive before retreating from Leipzig.

Napoleon's Army Trains

- On the 17th of October (and even on the 18th) Napoleon and Ney were anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Army Trains from Eilenburg. Besides baggage, this train also included the bridging trains, pontonniers, and engineers. The train also included the Army War Chest with Napoleon's gold! So no orders were given for the building of any bridges, because there were not enough tools or engineers available for the job. One very bad bridge was attempted but it collapsed.

For want of a nail...

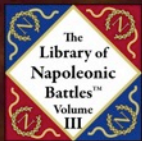
- The Army Trains, which were escorted by Bavarian and Saxon troops, retired to the fortress of Torgau when its arrival was blocked by a group of Cossacks from the Army of Silesia. Even though they were within three kilometers of Leipzig at that time!

Napoleon *at* Leipzig

1813
Leipzig
Bicentennial
Edition
2013



The Battle of Nations
October 13-19 1813
La Bataille des Nations



GAME DESIGN : KEVIN ZUCKER



OSG 203

Because our OSG game must include units for both pontoon trains and baggage trains, this was the kind of information that I was looking for. On the other hand, most military historians are not interested in these things. Hence, this mystery awaited a solution for 200 years.

L.A. Thiers on the Leipzig bridging

- Toward the evening of the 17th Napoleon had resolved to order a retreat. General Rogniat was ordered to proceed with the engineers of the Guard*, to throw fresh bridges across the Saale below Weissenfels.
- * Including one Guard Pontonier Co., 2 Guard Sapper Cos.
- NOTE: The French eventually crossed the Saale at Weissenfels on October 20th enroute to Freiburg.



L.A. Thiers: *History of the Consulate and the Empire*

Vol. IX. pp. 235-36 (Continued)

- As Montfort, the colonel of engineers who had succeeded Rogniat (after he departed for Weissenfels), had been much struck by the difficulty of making the whole army defile by the single bridge of immense length which runs from Leipzig to Lindenau, he had proposed to Berthier to construct additional ones, either above or below this, which might then be reserved for the artillery, cavalry and baggage.

L.A. Thiers: *History of the Consulate and the Empire*

Vol. IX. pp. 235-36 (Continued)

- This proposal, however, Berthier had rejected, saying that he knew very well how to execute Napoleon's orders, but that he was not in the habit of anticipating them. And it is probable that Napoleon himself, had the matter been brought before his notice, would not have been very ready to order what must have been a too early announcement of his retreat.

R.F. Delderfield, *Imperial Sunset*, p. 127

- Marbot blames Berthier, Chief of Staff, not for the destruction of the bridge over which he had no immediate control, but for his failure to provide alternative crossings during the day-long lull on the 17th. ‘The entire army assumed this had been done,’ Marbot says, ‘but when the order to retreat was given on the night of the 18th there was not a beam or a plank across a single brook.’

R.F. Delderfield, *Imperial Sunset*, p. 131

- All the marshals and senior officers of the Grand Army were disgusted with staff bungling that had occasioned such a disaster and the former street urchin Augereau was only voicing a general opinion when he asked, furiously, ‘Does the bugger know what he’s doing?’

Why no bridges could be built

- The lack of extra bridges on the Elster and the loss of the Army treasury meant tens of thousands of troops who might have been available for the campaign in 1814 were lost. The lack of a pontoon train and field forges would explain why no bridges were built over the Elster. The fact that the treasure was also in that convoy explains in part the evaporation of the army during November. Yet I cannot find any author who discusses the implications.

The Army Parks

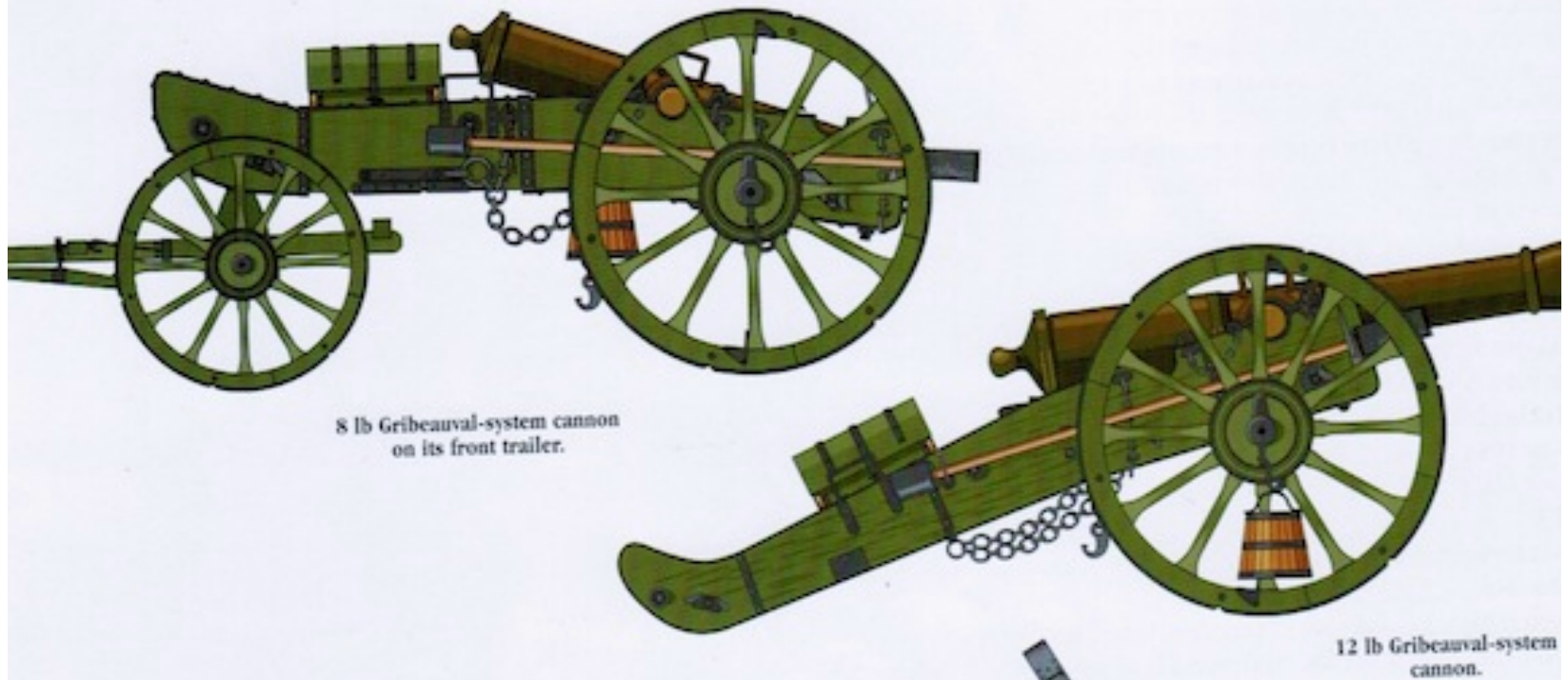
- Having been turned back by Cossacks when only a few miles from Leipzig, "General Durrieu moved his forces into a position (outside Torgau). He commanded 6,700 men, 2,560 horses, and 240 vehicles."
 - Nafziger, p. 327

Nafziger, p. 327.

- In addition to pontoneers and train troops, Durrieu brought to Torgau "a reinforcement of artillery and engineering troops, the 2nd and 8th Naval Military Artisan Battalions (1,220 men), two battalion cadres of the 42nd Line, the 5th and 17th Military Equipage Battalions (1,260 men), and a number of men employed in the various military administrations."

The Army Parks

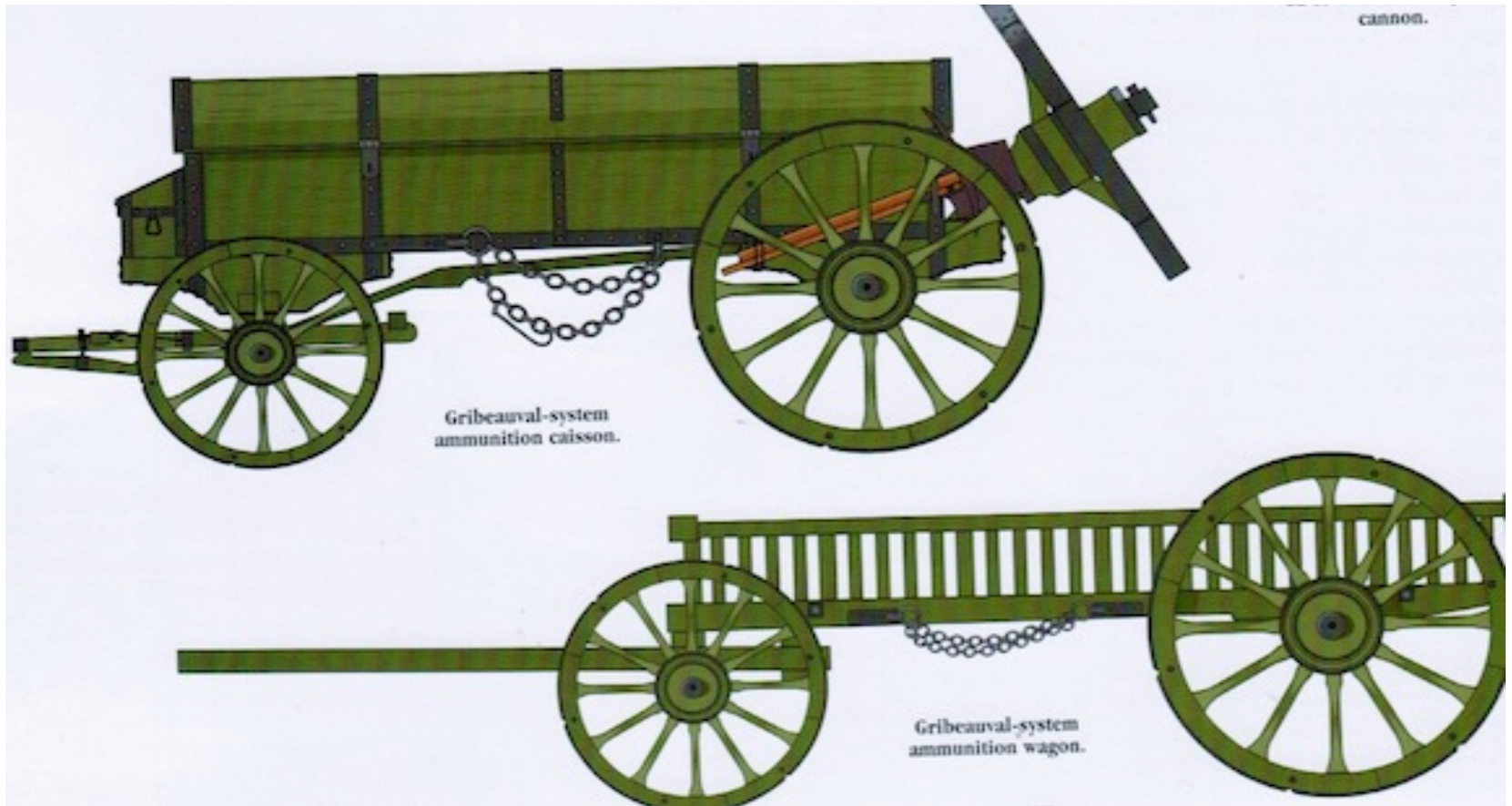
ARTILLERY RESERVE



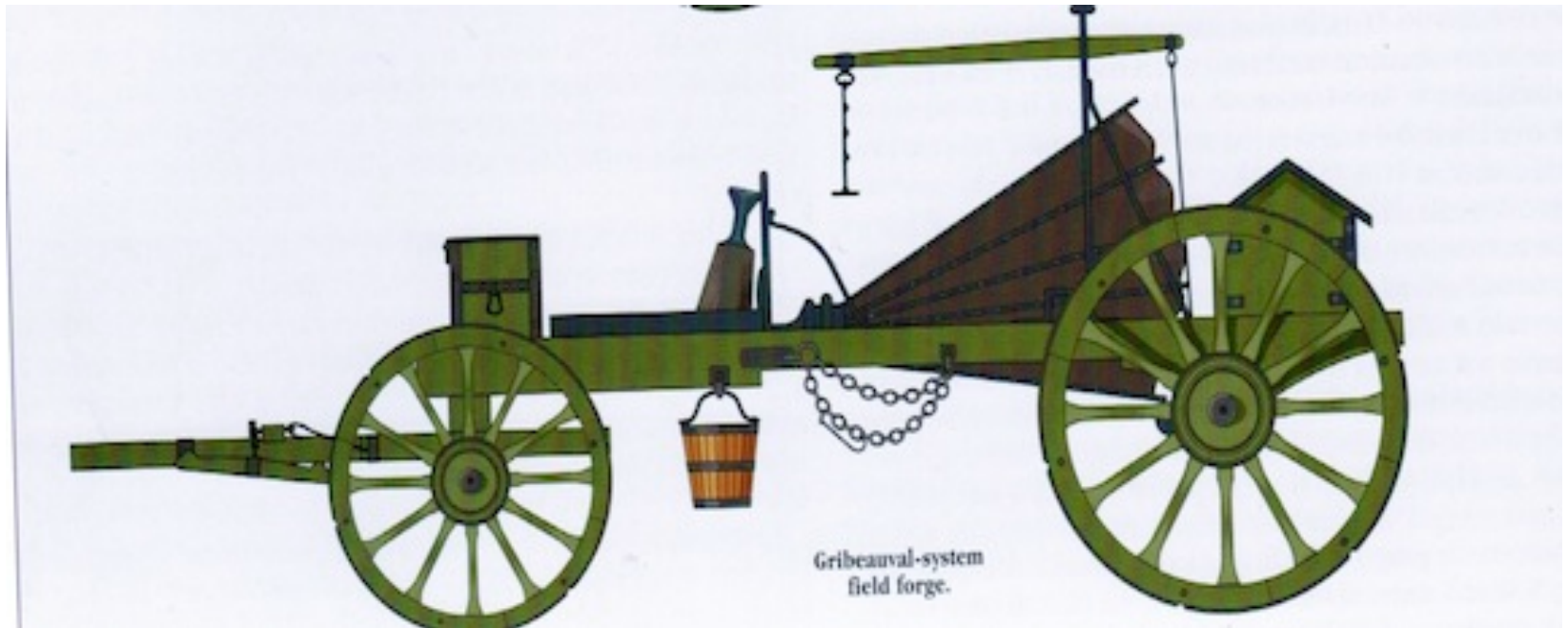
8 lb Gribbeauval-system cannon
on its front trailer.

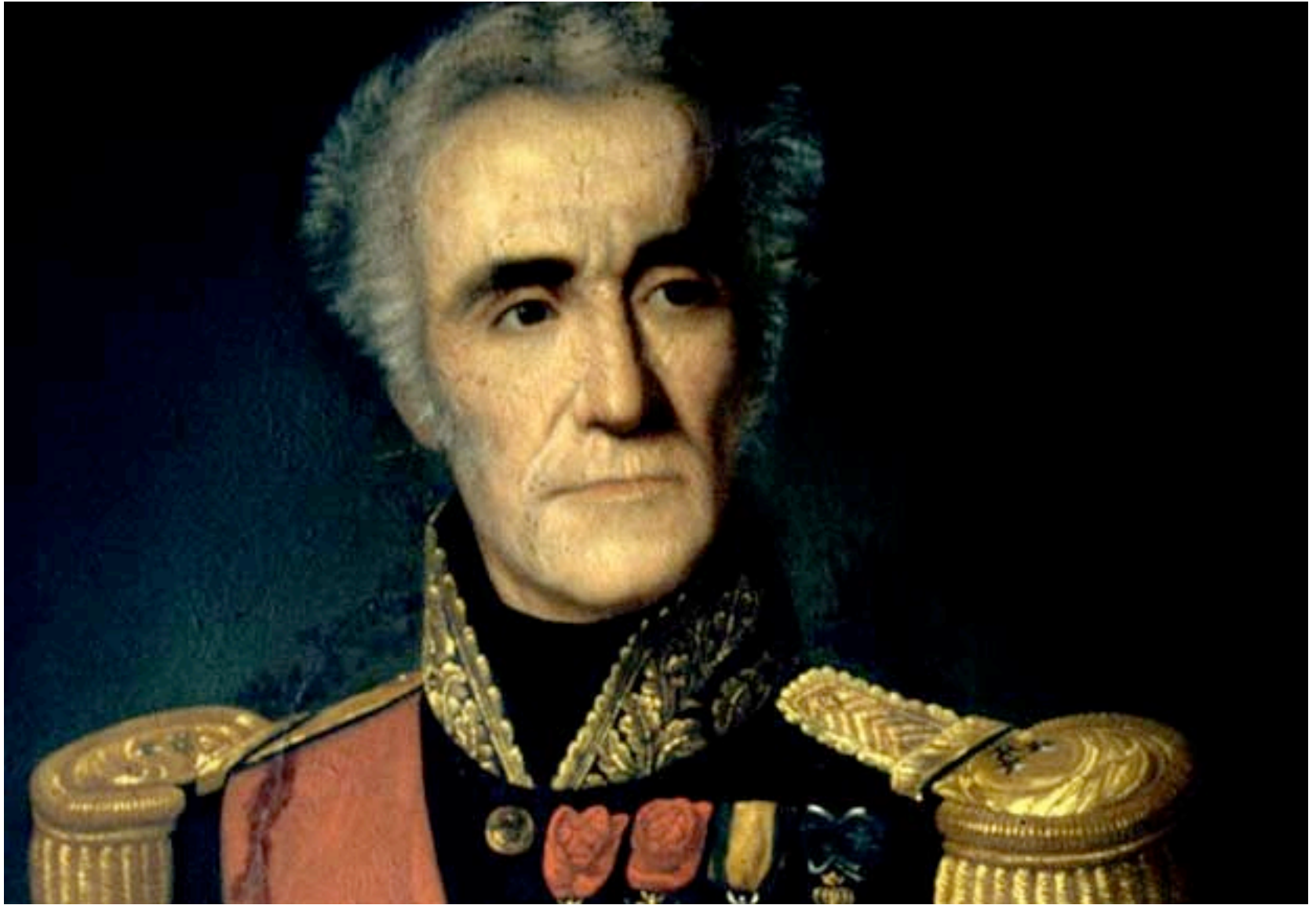
12 lb Gribbeauval-system
cannon.

Wagons



Mobile Forge





HQ Staff Failure

- General Antoine Simon Durrieu, with the Imperial war chest, the engineering park, the pontoon train and the portion of the artillery park that had not accompanied Reynier [actually Delmas of III Corps], had been a major concern for both the Emperor and Marshal Ney. Reynier was mistakenly instructed to hold the way open through Taucha—a failure of staff work, since Ney had reported that the train was actually coming from Wurzen.

Center of Operations

- Part of the Grand Park of the artillery, under General Valaze, got through by accompanying the 9th Division (III Corps): 2 Foot and 1 Horse batteries, Artillery Train (3 companies), Spanish Sappers (3 cos.), Gendarmes (1 co.), Equipage
- The "Park" made up the French Center of Operations—the fleet of vehicles, including tools and portable forges that were so vitally important for keeping the cavalry and artillery on the road—and for building bridges.

Army Parks Make-up

- Imperial War Chest (gold)
- Engineering Park. Artisans (craftsmen) The artisans were iron fabricators with their mobile forges.
- Pontoon Train (bridge train)
- Artillery Park (ammunition)

Army Parks TO/E

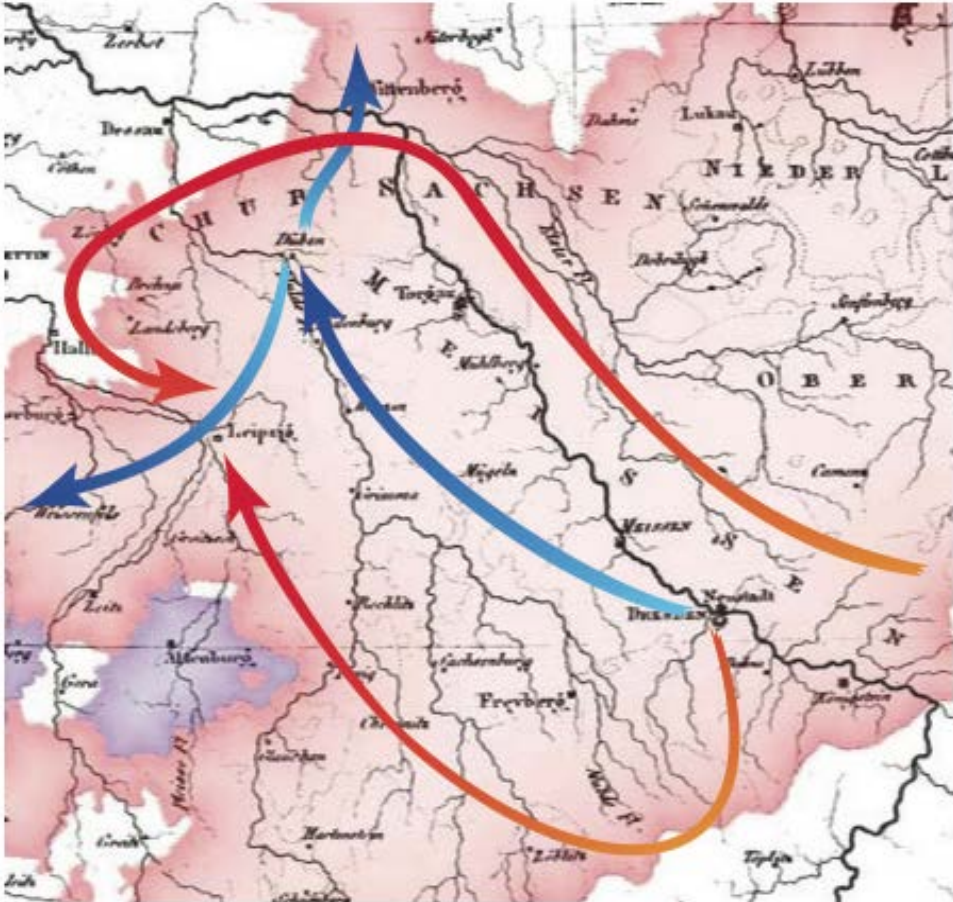
- There were 6,708 men with the park of artillery, pontoniers, engineers and administrative personnel. There were no ambulances or Headquarters staff with Durrieu's column, but it carried the crucial war chest, with the Imperial Gold.
 - Bowden (p. 294) states the park of artillery and engineers at 140 officers and 6,568 other ranks on 15 August.

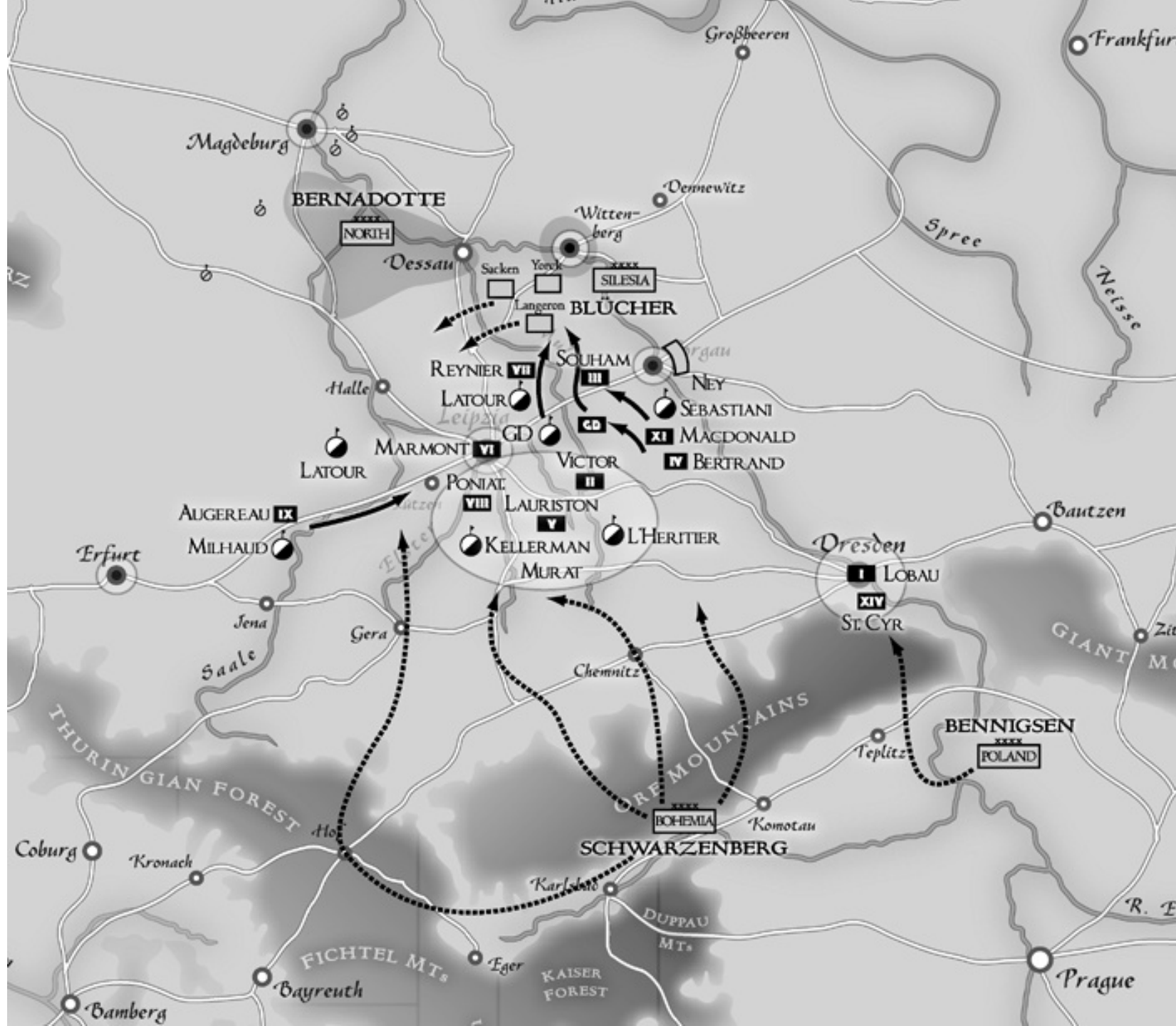
Army Parks Manpower

- Pontooneers...8 companies (1,560*)
Miners...1 company (200*)
Sappers...2 companies (400*)
Artisans...66 men
Marine Artisans... 2 Battalions (1,220)
Artillery Park ...2,000 men
Baggage... 2 battalions (1,260)
- TOTAL... 6,708
 - *Author's estimate; other strengths are for 20 Oct.
 - French Garrison of Torgau, Nafziger, p. 377.

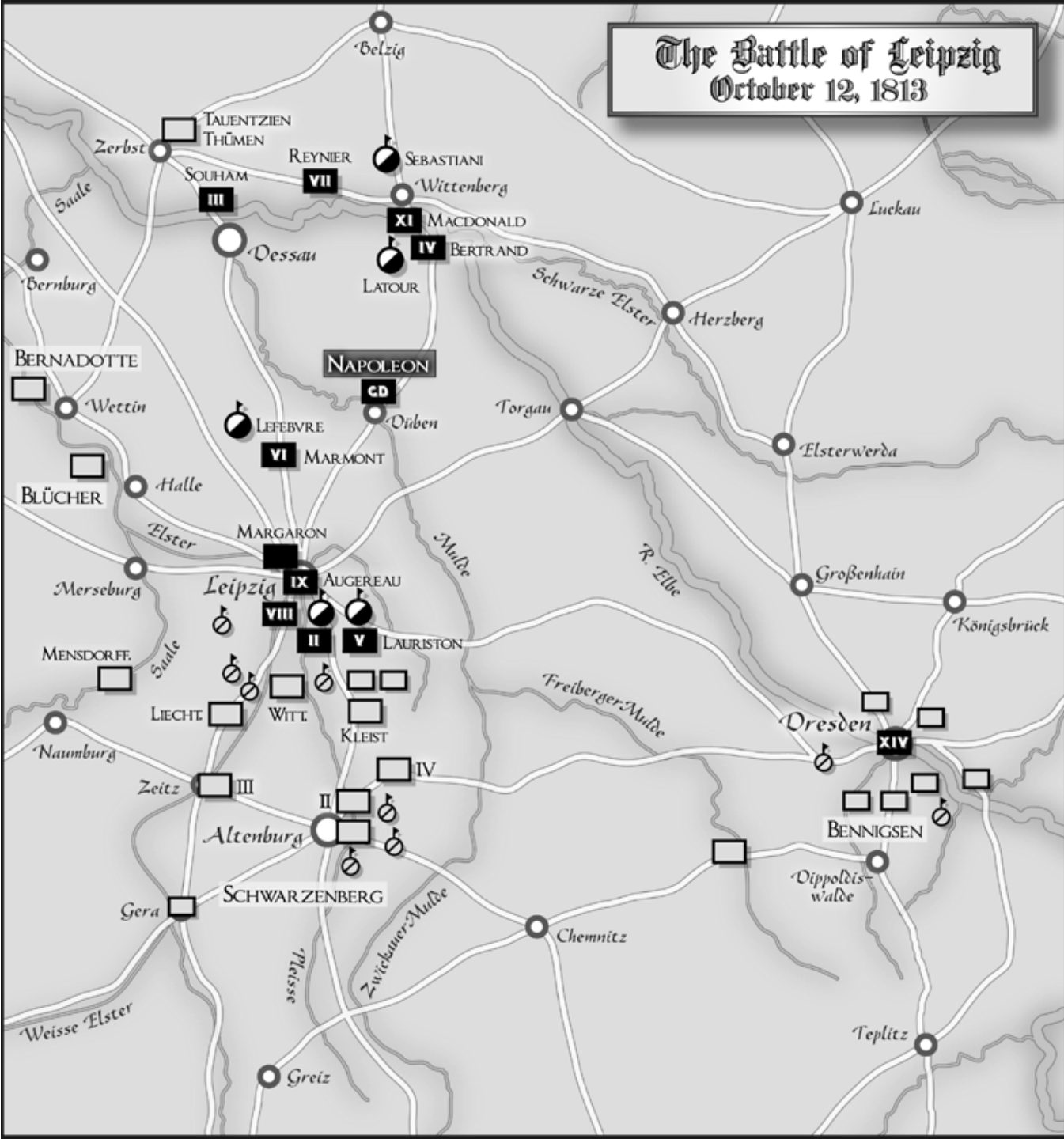
The approach to battle during early October.







The Battle of Leipzig October 12, 1813



BLÜCHER
xxxx
SILESIA

VI
MARMONT

xx
DELMAS

xx
DOMBROWSKI

NEY

III
SOUHAM

IV
BERTRAND

XI
MACDONALD

ARRIGHI

Gohlis

Schönefeld

xx
MARGARON
xx

NAPOLEON
xxxx
GRANDE ARMÉE

CD

LATOUR

IX
AUGEREAU

Probst-
hayda
PAJOL

LEFOL
xx

SOKOLNICKI

PONIA-
TOWSKI

VIII
OSLITZ

MURAT

V
LAURISTON

II
VICTOR

ZIETEN

MEERVELDT

AUSTRIAN
RESERVE

KLEIST

PAHLEN

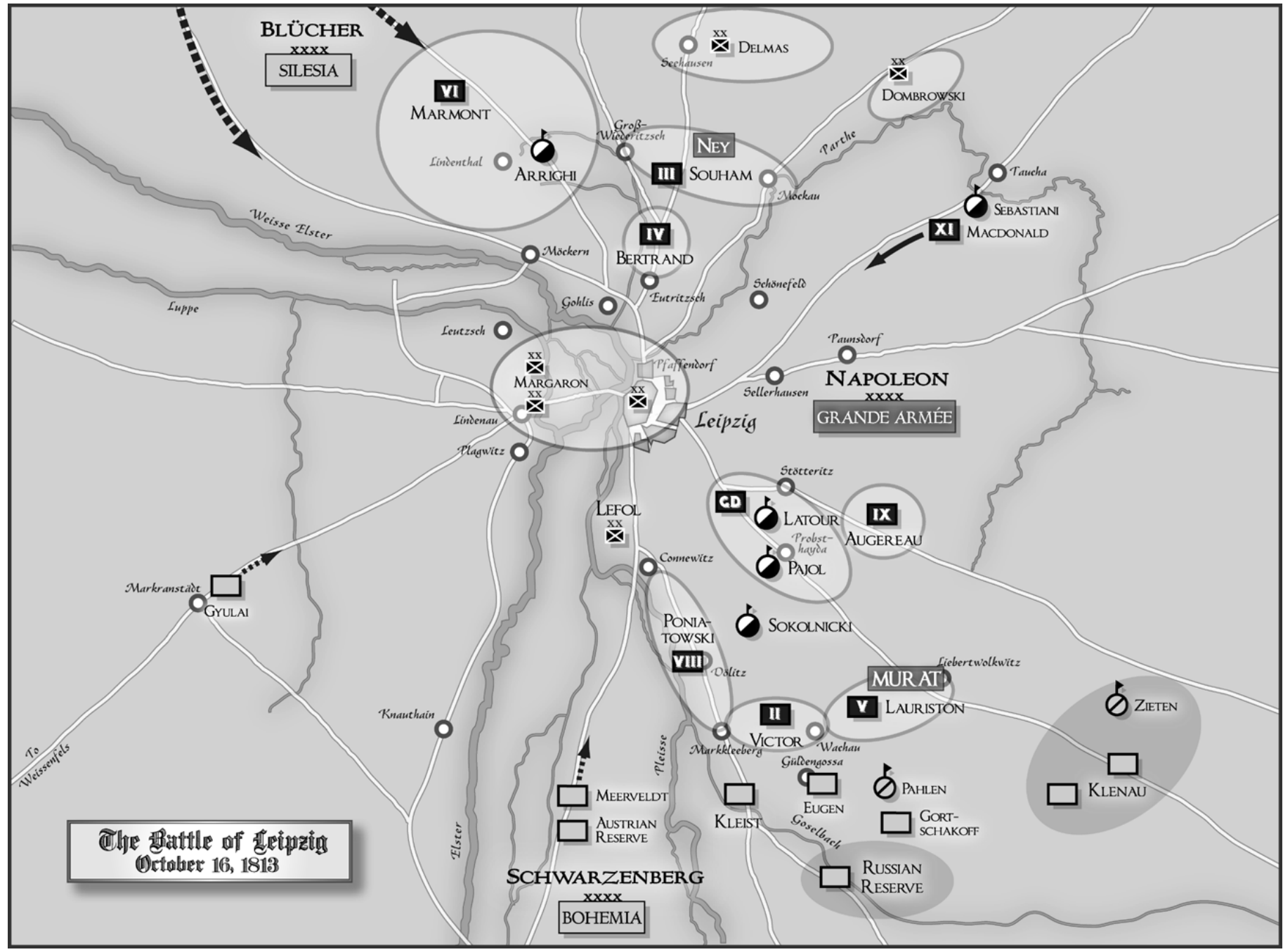
GORT-
SCHAKOFF

KLENAU

SCHWARZENBERG
xxxx
BOHEMIA

RUSSIAN
RESERVE

The Battle of Leipzig
October 16, 1813



Eilenburg

- "As Napoleon went on 13th October from Düben to Leipzig he had the bridge equipment, the artillery and engineer parks and the wagons of the food system which revolved around General Durrieu ordered to Eilenburg in the valley half-way between Torgau and Leipzig to go out and get in readiness to reunify with the Grande Armée in case the coming battle of Leipzig was lost. Durrieu was cut off from this and went under approval of the Governor of Torgau back there where he stood on the 19th between Fort Zinna and the large pond with 6,700 men, 2,560 horses, and 240 wagons."

Napoleon's Orders for the 14th, 3 AM

- "General Durrieu was ordered to guard Eilenburg, where he would collect parks, etc., on the left bank of the Mulde."
- Eilenburg is only 12 kilometers from Taucha. So while it took days to collect up the wagons they had not yet received their orders to march on Leipzig. Massive traffic jams at the bridges prevented all the wagons of the Army park from getting across the Mulde. They were still at or near Eilenburg on the morning of the 17th (3 days later).

Napoleon's Orders for the 14th, text

- “General Durrieu is to place the equipages of the bridge train, the wagons of the general headquarters, and the parks of artillery and engineering on the left bank of the Mulde; to entrust a Bavarian general in custody of Eilenburg; and make known the condition of the teams, the number of wagons, the time at which they will be able to leave, and the time it takes to arrive at Leipzig, and he will be ready to leave an hour after he receives the order, with all his wagons.” In fact the bridges were too crowded with troops and the parks were diverted to Wurzen.

Nafziger, p. 187

- During the evening of 16 October ... the high mood in the headquarters was only dampened by concern over Reynier's fate, and that of Durrieu's costly and vital park column. A report from Reynier finally arrived around midnight, stating that the VII Corps had advanced through Taucha.

Ney's After Action Report

- Ney's detailed report was received by Napoleon at 3:00 A.M. on 17 October. With regards to Reynier, Ney related that he had received no news. Ney also stated that during the evening of 16 October, Reynier had been sent orders to march through Eilenburg (direct) on Leipzig, while General Durrieu was to move through Wurzen with the grand park... The Emperor's main concern continued to be Durrieu's column of the grand park, and its arrival in Leipzig.
- Nafziger, pp. 187-88.

- “Durrieu, with the imperial war chest, the engineering park, the pontoon train and the portion of the artillery park that had not accompanied Reynier,* was a major concern of the Emperor. Reynier was instructed to hold the way through Taucha open ... Ney was very anxious for the army parks. Only a part of the artillery reserve marched with Reynier. The main portion appeared secure, but it had taken the longer way through Wurzen. Therefore on the afternoon of the 17th, Ney ordered the deployment of two battalions with several squadrons on the heights west of the Parthe, by Taucha, to link with GD Durrieu's forces.”
- * A column of engineers under General Valaze, consisting of 3069 men, 4 companies of sappers, train and baggage. These arrived on the 16th with Delmas' s 9th Division [not with Reynier].



Nafziger, p. 191

- Durutte's 32nd Division was supposed to attempt to open a passage immediately in the line Schönfeld-Paunsdorf. If this failed, Durrieu was instructed to take his trains to safety via Torgau. ... Ney deployed his cavalry in pickets (vedettes) before his lines, in order to contact Durrieu." The train could have arrived without problems if Ney had remembered where to look for them.

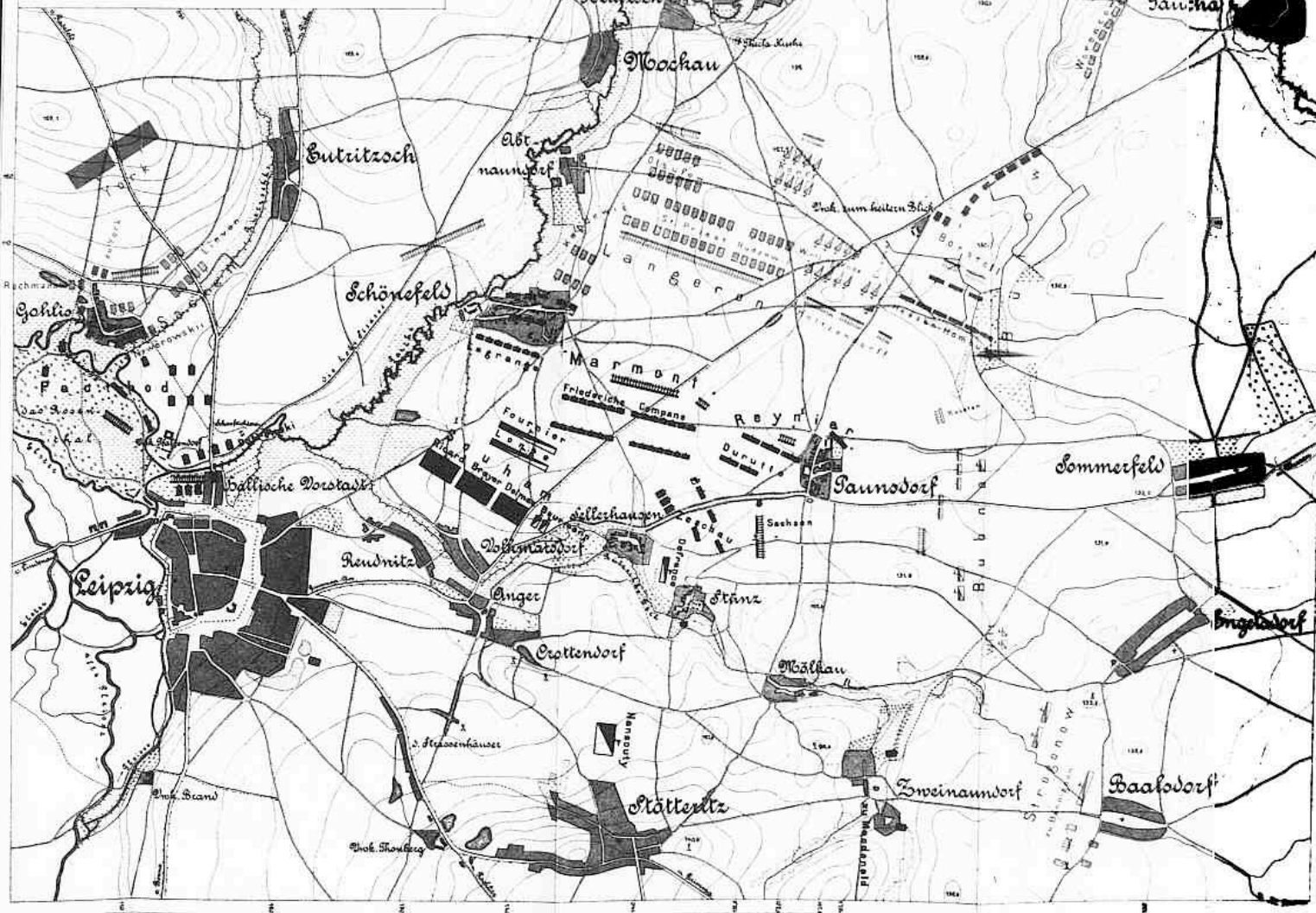
Wurzen

- Instead of proceeding directly through Taucha, the Army Park took the road south, as far as Wurzen where they turned west. On the 18th the trains were looked for on the line Schönfeld-Paunsdorf. The trains were actually moving from Sommerfeld to Paunsdorf when they encountered Bülow's light forces coming up from across the Parthe.
- According to the 2 PM situation map they might even have encountered Bubna's Austrian light forces.

Die Schlesische und die Nord-Armee in der Schlacht bei Leipzig

am 18. October 1813.

GröÙe Blatt: 2 Uhr nachmittags.



Cossacks

- Cossacks near Paunsdorf blocked the road from Wurzen during the afternoon of the 18th. At this point the trains were only two miles from Leipzig.
- F.L. Petre says that, around 4 PM on the 18th, "Some Cossacks, sent by Bülow to try and seize Napoleon's trains [coming from] Eilenburg, failed as the Bavarian, Saxon, and Hessian escort remained faithful. The trains retired to Torgau."
- The Bavarians are not mentioned as part of the Torgau garrison. The Saxons were given leave to return home.

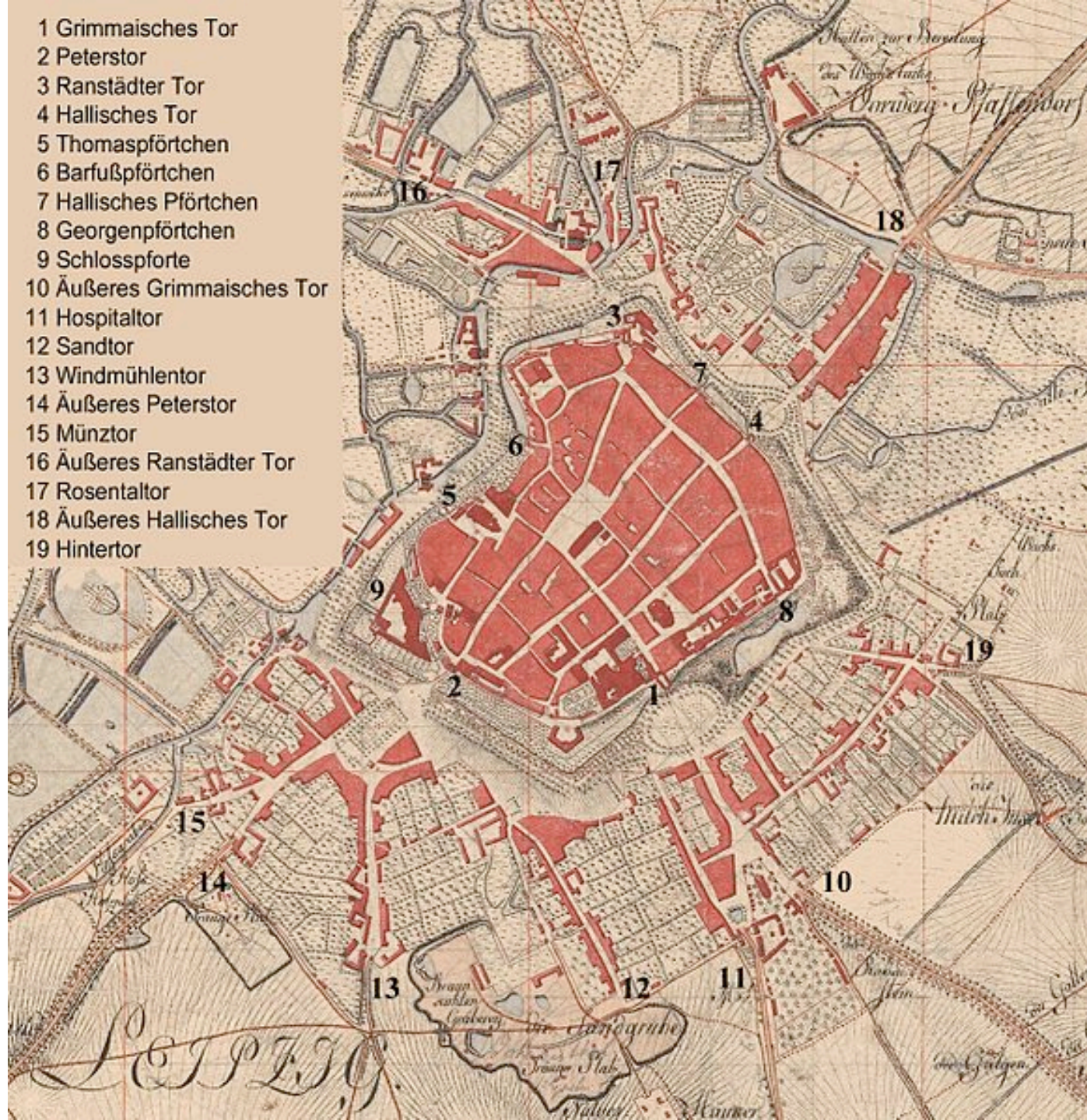
Consequences

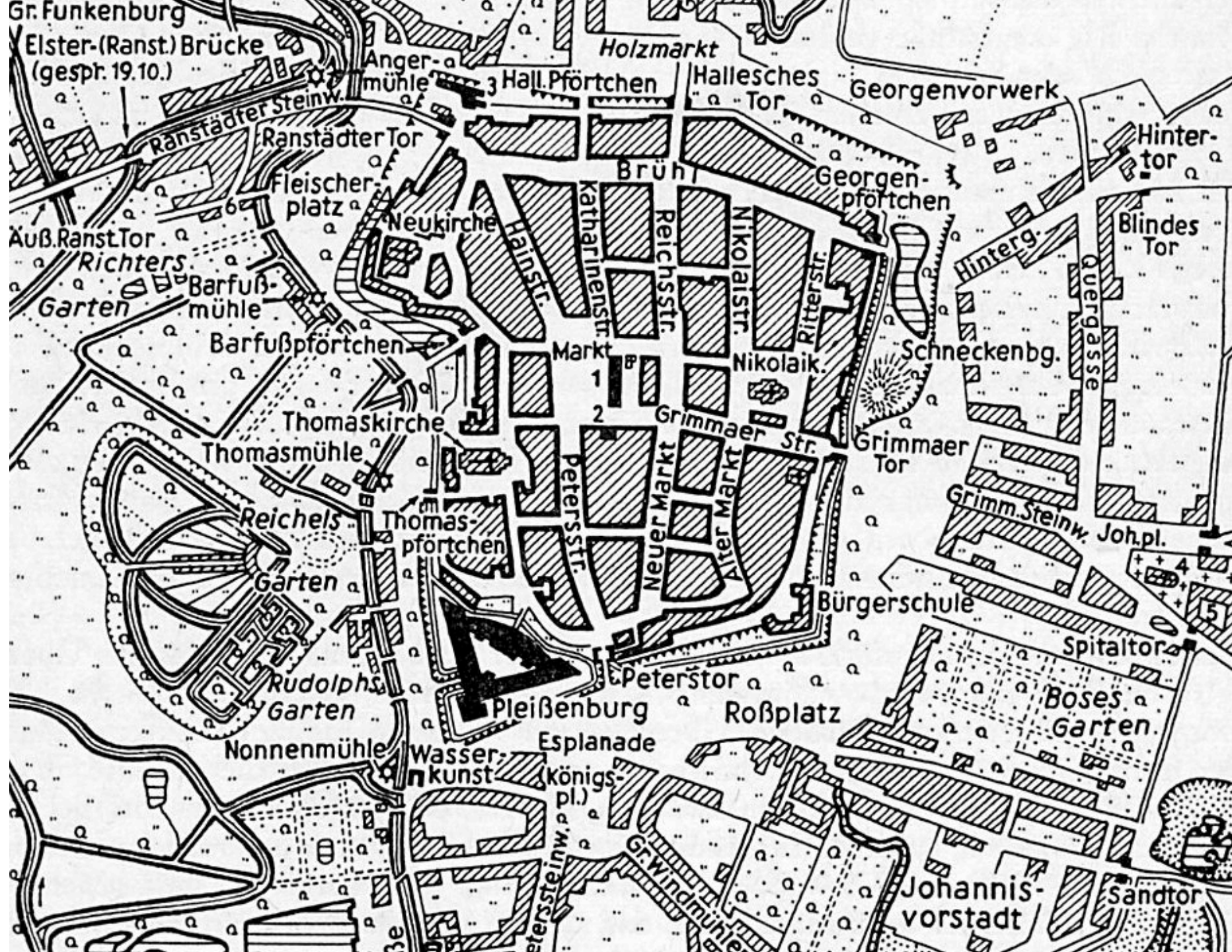
- Ney apparently forgot that the grand park was not on the Taucha road but rather had switched to the road from Wurzen. Hence this small party of Cossacks, seeking to link up with Bubna, were able to send Napoleon's Center of Operations scurrying away to Torgau. Now Napoleon knew he wouldn't be able to feed all his army. This may have decided him on a battle of attrition for the 18th, knowing that he was going to lose his army now anyway.

Aftermath



- 1 Grimmaisches Tor
- 2 Peterstor
- 3 Ranstädter Tor
- 4 Hallisches Tor
- 5 Thomaspförtchen
- 6 Barfußpförtchen
- 7 Hallisches Pförtchen
- 8 Georgenpförtchen
- 9 Schlosspforte
- 10 Äußeres Grimmaisches Tor
- 11 Hospitaltor
- 12 Sandtor
- 13 Windmühlentor
- 14 Äußeres Peterstor
- 15 Münztor
- 16 Äußeres Ranstädter Tor
- 17 Rosentaltor
- 18 Äußeres Hallisches Tor
- 19 Hintertor









THE GRAND GAMBLE



- Schloss Düben, 3 PM, 10 October
- The Emperor proposes to go to the right bank of the Elbe if Murat could not keep Leipzig. “My intention is, if the King of Naples were obliged to evacuate Leipzig, to repass the Elbe with all my army, throwing the Army of Silesia (and the Army of the North) on to the right bank, and taking all the time to destroy it; or, if it prefers to abandon its bridges, to leave it on the left bank and *take my line of operation on the right bank from Dresden to Magdeburg.*” Corr. 20,746, cited in Petre, p. 309.

Changing the LOC

- According to Friederich*, it is not credible that Napoleon ever entertained the idea, attributed to him by some modern French writers, of abandoning everything west of the Elbe. Surely this (above) indicates clearly that he did intend, at one time at least, to go to the right bank.
- Changing his line of operations would have been worthy of the most brilliant maneuvers of Napoleon at his best, though it would have entailed the loss of all his assets on the left bank.
- *Friederich, *Geschichte des Herbstfeldzuges 1813*

To the Right Bank

- Napoleon was in position to upend the strategic situation by changing his line of operations on Berlin. The road to Berlin lay invitingly open.
 - “He again refers to the idea of passing to the right bank in a letter to Reynier, in one to Berthier, and in one to Arrighi ...”
 - Corr. 20,749, 750, and 752, cited in Petre, p. 310.
- On the 11th, Napoleon remained “in great uncertainty as to Blücher's and Bernadotte's whereabouts, and reverts to the idea of going to the right bank and leaving them stranded on the left.” – Petre

Düben, 3 AM, 12 October

- Instead of falling back on Leipzig, Napoleon could flip the game board, by sending Bertrand and Macdonald to take Berlin, drawing Davout from Hamburg to join them, while Reynier pushed back Tauenzien, the only Coalition force of any consequence on the right bank of the Elbe. The remainder of the Grande Armée—which still controlled all the crossings and well-supplied bridgeheads at Magdeburg, Wittenberg, Torgau and Dresden—would prepare to defend the Elbe.

Historical determinism

- Since the Battle of Leipzig happened, most historians are invested in explaining why it *had* to happen. As a game designer I have just the opposite approach... If Napoleon was determined to fight at Leipzig, his decision to move several corps across the Elbe on the 11th and 12th makes no sense. Those moves by Macdonald and Reynier just don't fit in that narrative.

bon voyage

- The Emperor averred that if Blücher and Schwarzenberg attacked his supply line toward Naumberg he would *“wish them bon voyage and allow them to go on, sure that they would come back quicker than they went. What is of importance to me is not to be cut off from Dresden and the Elbe; I care little for being cut off from France.”*

Berlin

- Here was the grand gamble—the key moment of the whole campaign. Once Napoleon realized that Blücher had called his bluff and marched toward Halle—abandoning his bridges and trains—he was quite free to transfer his army to the right bank. He held all the bridgeheads; he controlled Blücher's and Bernadotte's rear areas with only Tauenzien's IV Prussian Corps between him and Berlin. The troops in that corps were of the poorest quality. Berlin was Napoleon's for the taking, whither a new line of communications could connect Hamburg by sea with France.

Bavaria

- With the French on the right bank, the Coalition Armies would have been forced to return to the Elbe and re-cross it in the teeth of the enemy. It is not possible that they could have invaded France while cut off from their own homeland. But this picture was muddied by news that Bavaria had changed sides. With Bavaria offering a support base, an invasion of France was not out of the question.

Uncertainty

- Bavaria's intervention, combined with uncertainty as to Bernadotte's whereabouts, dissuaded the Emperor from taking the grand gamble. With his scouts still unable to locate the Crown Prince, he had to allow that his army would be encountered on the farther bank. “Odeleben’s famous description of the Emperor at Düben, sitting idly drawing Gothic characters on a sheet of paper, is not quite consistent with the actual outturn of correspondence. Still, all accounts represent him as a very different person from the ceaseless worker of former times.” –Petre

Düben, 9:30 AM, 12 October

- Napoleon was awaiting further intelligence reports. He received from Murat indications that the Bohemian Army had changed its march direction, from Naumburg on the Saale, toward Leipzig. A message from St. Cyr reported Bennigsen's appearance at Dresden. Half an hour later, Napoleon draws up a note “On the union of the different *corps d'armee* at Taucha” (outside Leipzig). The die is cast—there will be no grand gamble.