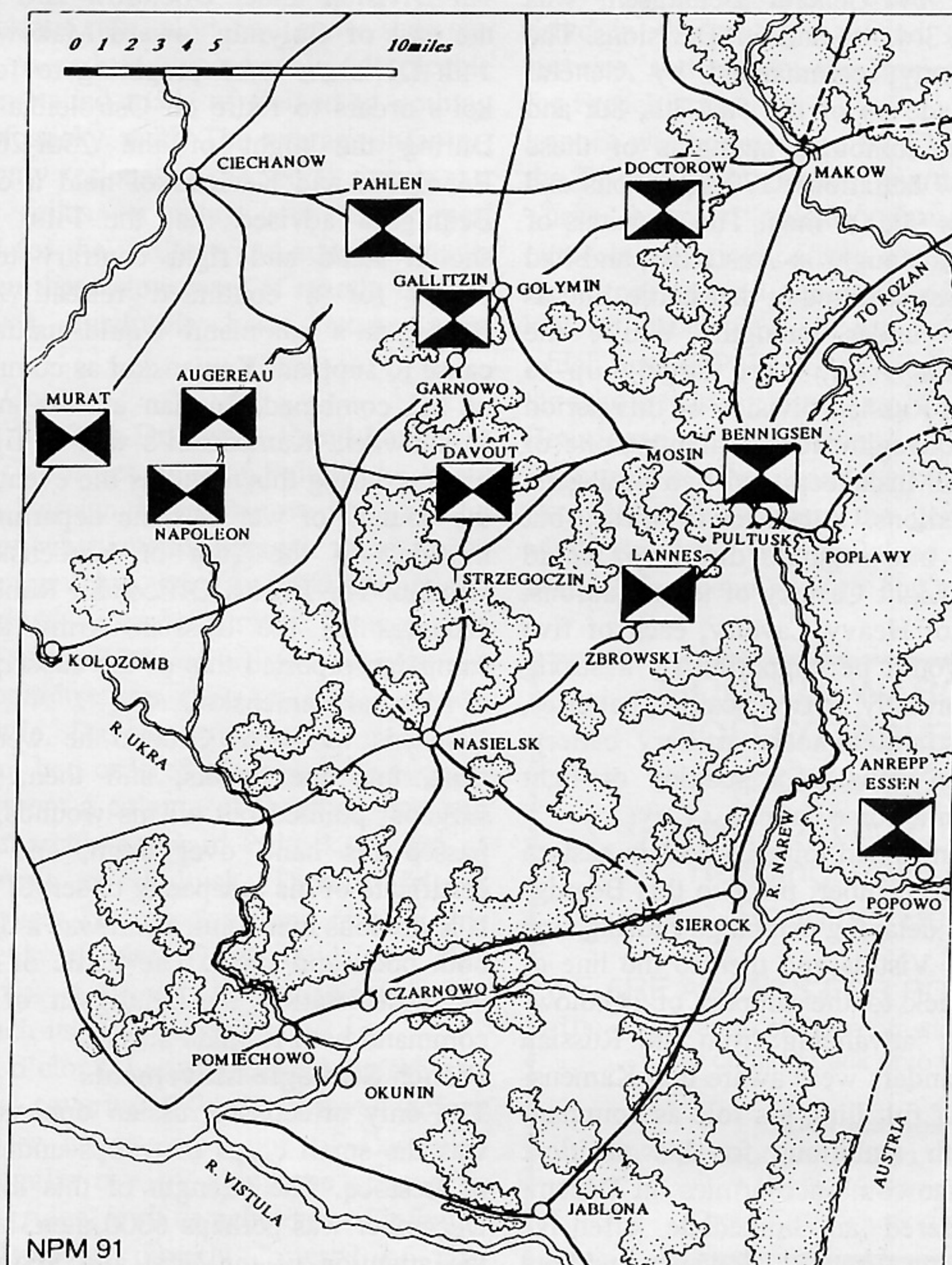


Putulsk, 26th December 1806

by N.P.Marsh



STRATEGIC SITUATION MORNING DECEMBER 26 1806

Following Napoleon's dramatic and convincing defeat of the Prussian Army at the battles of Jena and Auerstadt, and its virtual annihilation during the subsequent pursuit, their Russian allies commanded by Marshal Kamenskoi found themselves confronted by the full force of Napoleon's Army. Kamenskoi in particular was totally over awed by the occasion, and unsuitable for the task required of him. However, the Grande Armee was suffering from a near acute attack of campaign fatigue, the soldier's were in desperate need of rest and recuperation. Napoleon was aware of this and was desperate to catch the Russians whilst

he still held the advantage, at least of numbers. Once the Russians had been defeated and forced out of Poland, then he could afford his soldiers the winter quarters that they all needed.

Russian Strategic Movements

The campaign in Poland initially involved two Russian Armies, both under the supreme command of the aging Marshal Kamenskoi. The First Russian Army, commanded by General Bennigsen, was made up of the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 6th Divisions. The Second Russian Army, commanded by General Buxhowden, was made up of the 5th, 7th, 8th and 14th Divisions. The combined strengths of these two armies were 147 battalions, 170 squadrons and 504 cannon, perhaps 90,000 men. The divisions of the Second Army had fought at Austerlitz, and had not replaced the losses suffered at that battle, and as such were greatly under strength. Whilst the divisions of the First Army were largely up to strength. Typically a Russian division of this period was composed of six regiments of infantry, one of Grenadiers, three of Musketeers and two of Jagers, each of three battalions. Attached to these, but normally combined into separate divisions, would be one regiment of Light Cavalry of ten squadrons, and two regiments of Heavy Cavalry, each of five squadrons. These would be supported by a strong force of artillery, normally of two position batteries, three light batteries and a horse artillery battery. There were fourteen guns in a position or light battery and twelve in a horse battery.

The two Russian armies had joined forces in eastern Poland during mid December, prior to this Bennigsen had conducted a delaying campaign retiring first from the line of the Vistula and then to the line of the Ukra, falling back to the support of Buxhowden's Second Army advancing from the Russian border. Both commanders were aware that Kamenskoi was incapable of fulfilling his role as commander, and were both ambitious for his position. Kamenskoi joined the combined armies on December 21st, and ordered an immediate offensive against the advancing French. However, without command of the initiative, and failing to halt the French advance at the line of the Bug and Ukra, Kamenskoi ordered a precipitous retreat toward Ostrolenka. Due to the severe weather conditions and resultant atrocious road conditions, many Russian artillery pieces and other heavy equipment convoys were subsequently abandoned on the roadside to the pursuing French. Following Napoleon's successful passage of the Ukra, spearheaded

by Davout's Third Corps, the Russian Armies had been forced back first on Nasielsk, and from there north toward Golymin and north-east toward Pultusk. Bennigsen and Kamenskoi were at Pultusk with the 2nd and 6th Divisions under Ostermann-Tolstoi and Sedmaratzki, with elements of the 3rd, 4th and 5th Divisions. The remainder of these latter divisions were concentrating on Golymin, with the 7th Division under Doctorow and Buxhowden to the east of Golymin toward Makow. The 8th and 14th Divisions were preparing to follow Kamenskoi's orders to retire on Ostrolenka from Popowo. During the night of the 25th-26th December, Bennigsen and Kamenskoi held a council of war. Bennigsen advised that the First Russian Army should stand and fight contrary to Kamenskoi's orders for a continued retreat. A victory for Bennigsen's command would naturally assist his cause to supplant Kamenskoi as commander in chief of the combined Russian armies in preference to Buxhowden. Kamenskoi's will to fight was finally broken during this night, as the eventual outcome of the council of war was the departure early on the morning of the 26th of Kamenskoi, alone, for Grodno. The British Officer Sir Robert Wilson who accompanied the Russian Army throughout this campaign reported this of the subsequent behaviour of Marshal Kamenskoi.

"On his return to Grodno he went, without his shirt, into the streets, and then, sending for a surgeon, pointed out all his wounds, groaned as he passed his hand over them, and insisted on a certificate of his incapacity to serve".

It is obvious that Kamenskoi was a defeated man, in both body and spirit. The battle of Pultusk was to be a declaration by Bennigsen of his ability to command both Russian armies.

French Strategic Movements

The only effective Prussian opposition still active was the small corps of troops under the command of Lestocq. The strength of this formation in late December was perhaps 6000 men, but it had drawn the attention of the First and Sixth French Corps under Bernadotte and Ney, and the Second Reserve Cavalry, composed of four cavalry divisions under the command of Bessiere. These formations had successfully driven a wedge between Lestocq and Kamenskoi, forcing the Prussians north toward Koenigsberg. Meanwhile the Fourth and Seventh Corps commanded by Soult and Augereau, and the First Reserve Cavalry commanded by Murat, had occupied the central position between the Prussians

and Russians and were manoeuvring to turn the Russian strategic right flank. The remaining French forces, Davout's Third Corps and Lannes' Fifth Corps were pursuing Kamenskoi north and north east. From Nasielsk, Davout's Third Corps had been directed toward Golymin, whilst the Lannes Fifth Corps had been directed toward Pultusk.

Weather and March Conditions

Since December 24th a thaw had set in, which assisted by constant rain, sleet and snow showers, had combined to reduce the normally despicable and largely unmetalled roads of Poland to nothing short of seas of sticky mud. The average infantryman could be only seriously expected to march at a rate of 1-1/4 miles an hour over these road conditions, and for the artillery and supply wagons to maintain even these slow rates of march, double, treble and even quadruple horse teams were required.

The March to Contact

The morning of the 26th December found Lannes at Zbroski, about five miles short of Pultusk, he knew that there were Russian forces before him, but he had little idea of what overall strength these forces were in. He ordered his units to break camp and start toward Pultusk at seven o'clock. Lannes rode forward with an escort of Light Cavalry to personally reconnoitre the enemies expected rear guard. Meanwhile, Davout with orders to march toward Golymin, had ordered his Third Division to pursue and intercept a column of Russians that had been observed marching toward Pultusk. Aware of Lannes movement on Pultusk, Davout felt it beneficial to protect Lannes flank and rear by this token movement of the Third Division. This division was not expected to coordinate with Lannes, nor attach itself to Lannes.

At around ten o'clock Lannes arrived before the Russian position covering Pultusk. Arrayed before him he could see an irregular line of Cossacks, supported by regular cavalry along the crest of a fairly substantial ridge, with detachments of infantry and artillery deployed directly forward of him across the Nasielsk-Pultusk road, and away in the distance within and beyond the Mosin Wood which straddled the ridge and the Golymin-Pultusk road. At this juncture an aide arrived with orders from Berthier. The Emperor required that Lannes march directly on Pultusk, cross the Narew by the bridge situated there, and immediately construct a bridgehead. Lannes was advised that the Russian strategic centre had been pierced, and that Davout was

marching on Golymin. Lannes did not know of the movement of Davout's Third Division. His orders however were clear and the Emperor had given Lannes no evidence that he should expect any serious Russian resistance. Perhaps the Russians were at this very moment engaged in the delicate operation of crossing the Narew themselves, and the forces before Lannes were the Russian rear guard protecting that operation. There was no time to lose, drive in the rear guard and take the enemy by surprise, and present the Emperor with more glory for French arms.

Lannes was soon joined by Claparede commanding the Fifth Corps advance guard of the 17th Light. These infantry quickly drove in the Cossack outposts, offering Lannes a slightly better view of the forces arrayed along the ridge line, but he still had no clear view of the valley beyond, within which nestled Pultusk, the vital bridge, and virtually the whole Russian First Army.

Bennigsen's Dispositions

Bennigsen had not abandoned the order to retreat on Ostrolenka, those were the general orders for the whole Russian Army in Poland, it would have been suicidal for Bennigsen to act independently of the

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Second Russian Army and attempt to confront the whole French Army alone. Bennigsen was attempting to gain time, and to determine which was the most effective line of retreat toward Ostrolenka. From Pultusk he had two choices, the shortest route was through Makow along the left bank of the Narew, the other route meant crossing the bridge at Pultusk and a longer march along the right bank of the Narew through Rozan. Bennigsen had to know where the greatest threat lay, from Golymin, which would effectively block the use of the shorter line of retreat, or from Nasielsk and Warsaw, blocking the use of the bridge at Pultusk. Pultusk was shielded from view to the west by a prominent ridge and plateau which ran north-south from the village of Mosin to the banks of the Narew. South of Mosin and through which ran the Golymin-Pultusk road was the substantial Mosin Wood, beyond this lay the vital Pultusk-Makow road. Bennigsen deployed his main line of battle east of the ridge parallel to the Golymin-Pultusk road with his back to the Narew. This position he occupied with forty-five battalions and eighty-four cannon. The first line was composed of twenty-one battalions of the 2nd and 3rd Divisions, forward of which were deployed seventy cannon. Three hundred paces beyond these was the second line composed of eighteen battalions. Finally a third line of five battalions from the 5th and 6th Divisions were deployed to the left rear close to Pultusk, with a reserve of fourteen cannon. These forces were placed under the overall control of Ostermann-Tolstoi. Forward of these forces and partly visible to the reconnaissance of Lannes, were two advanced wing detachments, linked by a line of regular cavalry.

The advanced right wing was commanded by Barclay de Tolly, and consisted of nine Jager battalions, three Grenadier battalions, ten squadrons of the Polish Uhlan Regiment, and twenty-eight cannon. Barclay deployed the Jagers within the Mosin wood, supported by two Grenadier battalions on the road within the wood. Fourteen cannon supported by his remaining infantry battalion he deployed outside the wood across the road facing toward the wood, the other battery was at right angles to this facing toward the south-west and the Nasielsk road. The cavalry he deployed north of the wood, east of the village of Mosin.

The advanced left wing was commanded by Bagavout, and consisted of ten battalions, fourteen cannon, two detached squadrons of Dragoons and

several hundred Cossacks, all from Sedmaratzki's 6th Division. These men were largely deployed to the west of Pultusk below the ridge line running north from the Narew.

Deployed between Barclay and Bagavout were twenty-eight squadrons of regular cavalry, and forward of these at least 3000 Cossacks supported by ten squadrons of Hussars. Bennigsen's forces amounted to perhaps 45000, supported by 128 cannon.

Lannes' Dispositions

Fifth Corps was composed of the divisions of Suchet and Gazan, and the Light Cavalry division of Treilhard. Attached to Lannes was Becker's Dragoon division from the cavalry reserve. As his divisions began to arrive before the Russian positions, Lannes deployed his units either side of the Nasielsk-Pultusk road under cover of the woods which bordered the road. In his first line Lannes deployed eight battalions of Suchet's division. These were divided into three tactical formations. On the right commanded by Claparede were the battalions of the 17th Light. In the centre commanded by Wedell, were two battalions of the 64th Line and the 1/88th Line, and on the left commanded by Suchet, were two battalions of the 34th Line and the 2/88th Line. Becker was attached to Suchet, and Treilhard was attached to Claparede and Wedell. Those cannon which had been successfully hauled through the mud were also attached to Claparede and Wedell. Deployed three hundred paces beyond these formations was Gazan's division, deployed in two lines. The first was composed of 100th and 103rd Line of Gazan's division and the 40th Line from Suchet's, and the second line and final reserve was made up of the two battalions of the 21st Light. Lannes had at his immediate disposal perhaps 16000 to 20000 men, supported by sixteen to twenty-eight cannon. Lannes was outnumbered by at least two to one, but he could only see at most 15000 Russian regular forces immediately before him, and to Lannes those were good odds.

The Battle - The Initial Attacks

At eleven o'clock Lannes commenced his attack. Claparede advanced toward Pultusk, leaving the Nasielsk road and following a route parallel to the right bank of the Narew. Those Cossacks deployed before Bagavout's position quickly turned back on their regular supports, uncovering two battalions of the 4th Jagers. The French columns drove on forcing the Jagers back in their turn. Bennigsen immediately dispatched four battalions from the left

of his first and third main battle lines, to support Bagavout. As Claparede was gaining this ground, Wedell had advanced his battalions along the Nasielsk road, and then performed a change of front in an attempt to coordinate his attack with Claparede, by bringing his battalions on the right flank of Bagavout. Unfortunately the change of front had in fact exposed Wedell's own flank to the attention of the Russian regular cavalry deployed to the right of Bagavout. Seven squadrons commanded by Koschin, were flung into Wedell's exposed flank, simultaneously, the rallied 4th Jager and Bagavout's own cavalry detachment struck Wedell to the front. The 64th Line was only saved from complete annihilation by the appearance of the 1/88th Line on the flank of Koschin's cavalry. The melee continued throughout a blinding snowstorm, and finally the Russian forces withdrew, Koschin drawing back to the left rear, and Bagavout to the reverse slope of the ridge. Both the French and Russians claimed the annihilation of their opponents, but it is more probable to assume that the Russians withdrew because they had forces to withdraw, the French on the other hand did not. A little late in the day for Wedell, Treilhard now advanced his light cavalry toward a Russian Hussar Regiment deployed along the ridge. As the French cavalry advanced, the Russian Hussars calmly wheeled to their left exposing a twelve gun horse battery whose direct fire was able to halt any further movement from Treilhard's cavalry.

Meanwhile, accompanied by both Lannes and Suchet the 34th Line had been thrown into the attack against Barclay's forces deployed within Mosin Wood. Those Jagers directly before this onslaught were rapidly driven back onto the two battalions of Grenadiers in reserve within the wood. With these two battalions the Russians led a successful counter attack, driving back the 34th to the perimeter of the wood. However, similar to Wedell's saviour on the right, it was to be the appearance of the 2/88th Line that would tip the balance in the French favour during this particular melee. With the three battalions at his disposal, Suchet was able with grim determination to maintain his hold on at least part of the Mosin Wood.

In the centre, Gazan with the second line had steadily advanced toward the top of the ridge. Bennigsen had recalled those cavalry which had previously been deployed on and forward of the ridge, repositioning the squadrons to his right rear.

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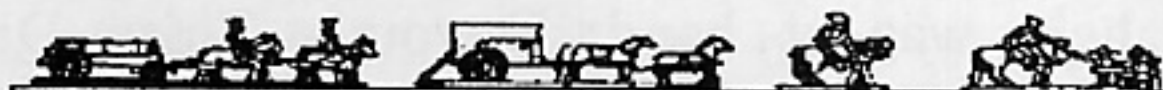
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As Gazan moved to occupy this empty ground he became exposed to the full effect of the Russian artillery deployed forward of the main line of battle. Perhaps eighty-four cannon were now able to concentrate their fire on the three regiments of Gazan's forward formations. Gazan had little or no answer to this massive barrage, what few cannon he had available were soon suffering from the effects of the Russian counter battery fire.

The Arrival of D'Aultanne

Lannes had by now realised that his situation was becoming critical. He had embroiled his Corps in an unequal conflict, he had no hope of any support from Nasielsk and no reason to believe that he could expect any help from Golymin. His initial attacks had all been severely handled by the Russians, and his only remaining reserve were the two battalions of the 21st Light and the three Dragoon Regiments of Becker's division. The Russians apparently had at least forty battalions still in their main battle lines supported by nearly one hundred guns. Defeat was staring Lannes head on, if Bennigsen moved to the attack there would be no hope for the Fifth Corps.

But help was at hand. Davout's Third Division under the command of his Chief of Staff d'Aultanne, had followed his Corps commanders orders completely, and fortunately for Lannes added a little initiative for good measure. At six o'clock he had set out in pursuit of the Russian column that had been observed marching toward Pultusk. He had quickly overrun this small column, capturing fourteen cannon and much accompanying baggage. The Cossacks who had been escorting this column had themselves ridden off towards Pultusk. Having fulfilled his orders, d'Aultanne prepared to bivouac for the night. Sometime after eleven o'clock d'Aultanne became aware of a heavy cannonade toward Pultusk. D'Aultanne resolved that his presence was needed at Pultusk, and so he set the Third Division in motion. The division was composed of four regiments, with two squadrons of cavalry attached. By a valiant effort he was also able to drag with him one piece of artillery from his divisional artillery. D'Aultanne rode forward to advise Lannes of his divisions approach, but there was no time for any elaborate coordination of their plans of attack, any fresh attack would help Lannes now.

The Cossacks that had retreated from d'Aultanne earlier that day now advised Bennigsen of the threat to his flank from Golymin. Bennigsen immediately

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began to realign his right flank, drawing back his regiments to face the rear of Mosin Wood. He also redeployed a number of batteries of artillery to face the approach of this new threat, thus mercifully reducing the number of cannon arrayed against Gazan.

D'Aultanne arrived before Mosin village around two o'clock and was immediately engaged by the ten squadrons of the Polish Uhlan Regiment belonging to Barclay's command. This threat was soon disposed of and as d'Aultanne approached the Mosin Wood he deployed his battalions for attack in half-battalions columns at fifty pace intervals. Bennigsen dispatched six battalions from his second line to Barclay's aid. However, d'Aultanne had already launched his attack against Barclay's units within the wood, successfully throwing them back beyond the wood toward their now refused main right flank. Once Barclay had evacuated the wood, Bennigsen was able to direct his artillery fire against the French now occupying it. This artillery fire and the threat of a counter attack by Barclay's rallied regiments proved too much for Suchet's 34th Line. These men who had held on to their position within the wood for several hours, now broke and fled. This movement exposed d'Aultanne's right flank, against which Bennigsen directed twenty squadrons of cavalry that had been held in reserve on the right flank.

Fortunately the French 85th Line was able to redeploy into closed square, and successfully fought off the Russian cavalry, who made a number of charges, the last of which was launched at eight o'clock. However, the action of the Russian cavalry was entirely successful in halting d'Aultanne's further advance.

The Final Attack

Whilst d'Aultanne was making his attack against

the Mosin Wood, Lannes had determined to launch another attack against Bagavout. Gazan, in the centre, was ordered to redeploy his remaining artillery pieces and direct their fire against the flank of Bagavout's position. At the same time, both Claparede and Wedell would launch a coordinated attack. This attack was initially successful, driving the Russians back toward Pultusk. However, Bennigsen was able to dispatch a further five fresh battalions from his main battle line to assist Bagavout. With this support he was able to drive both Wedell and Claparede back, recapturing a battery of guns that had fallen to the enemy during this last French attack.

The battle was now effectively over, darkness had fallen at around four o'clock, and no further attacks were to be launched, except for the Russian cavalry's spoiling tactics against d'Aultanne. Both Lannes and d'Aultanne withdrew unmolested and in good order to their respective prebattle positions. During the night Bennigsen decided that it would be wiser to retire to Ostrolenka through Rozan, along the right bank of the Narew. Presumably d'Aultanne's appearance from the direction of Golymin convinced him that it would be better to place the Narew between himself and the French. Bennigsen was able to continue his retirement on Ostrolenka totally unmolested, arriving there in relatively good order on December 28th. It is interesting to note that Bennigsen reported that he considered himself opposed by no less than 60000 Frenchmen commanded by Napoleon in person. He further criticised the inaction of Buxhowden, who although only a short distance away, had offered no assistance to the First Army. Clearly, Bennigsen was prepared to go to great lengths of deception to further his claim to the command of the Russian forces in Poland, which was to be finally confirmed on January 10th.



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Bennigsen. (After G. Dawe)

D'Aultanne was recalled by Davout on the morning of the 27th, and ordered to rejoin Third Corps at Garnowo near Golymin. The effects of the battle upon Lannes Corps had been catastrophic. Realistic casualty figures of 7000 French dead and wounded, meant that Fifth Corps had suffered anything between thirty and forty-five per cent casualties. The Russians had suffered at most 5000 casualties, or perhaps eleven per cent. The combat effectiveness of Fifth Corps had been seriously reduced. Fifth Corps had not been destroyed, as Seventh Corps was to be at Eylau, two months later. But neither Gazan nor Suchet's divisions would be engaged in any serious front line combat operations, before their reappearance in Spain during the 1808 invasion of Spain, under the command of Mortier. Lannes himself was eventually appointed to the command of a new Reserve Corps formation in early 1807. It was with this new Reserve Corps that he was to be engaged against Bennigsen six months later at the final battle of the Polish campaign, the battle of Friedland.

Orders of Battle

French Fifth Corps

Commander. Marshal Lannes

First Division - General of Division Suchet (7000-8000 men)

Generals of Brigade Claparede and Wedell

17th Light

34th Line

40th Line

64th Line

88th Line

Second Division - General of Division Gazan (4000 - 5000 men)

21st Light

100th Line

103rd Line

Corps Light Cavalry - General Treillard (1000-1200 men)

21st Chasseurs a Cheval

9th Hussars

10th Hussars

Attached

Dragoon Division - General Becker (1000 - 1200 men)

13th Dragoons

15th Dragoons

20th Dragoons

French Third Corps

Third Division - General of Brigade d'Aultanne (6000 - 7000 men)

Generals of Brigade Petit and Gauthier

12th Line

21st Line

25th Line

85th Line

Attached (200 men)

1 squadron of Chasseurs a Cheval

1 squadron of Dragoons

Totals Infantry 17000 - 20000 men

Cavalry 2200 - 2600 men

Artillery 400 - 700 men - 16 - 28 cannon at most

19600 - 23300 men

First Russian Army

Commander. General of Cavalry

Bennigsen

2nd Division - Lieutenant General Ostermann-Tolstoi (7500 - 8250 men)

Petersburg Grenadier Regiment

Pavlov Grenadier Regiment

Jeletz Musketeer Regiment

Polotsk Musketeer Regiment

Lithuania Musketeer Regiment

6th Division - Lieutenant General Sedmaratzki (9000 - 9900 men)

Major General Bagavout

Azov Musketeer Regiment

Nisov Musketeer Regiment

Ouglitz Musketeer Regiment

Revel Musketeer Regiment

Sofia Musketeer Regiment

3rd Jager Regiment

4th Division (-) attached to Bagavout (3000 - 3300 men)

Minsk Musketeer Regiment

4th Jager Regiment

3rd Division (-) Major General Barclay de Tolly (6000 - 6600 men)

Tauride Grenadier Regiment

Mourmansk Musketeer Regiment

20th Jager Regiment

21st Jager Regiment

5th Division (-) (6000-6750 men)

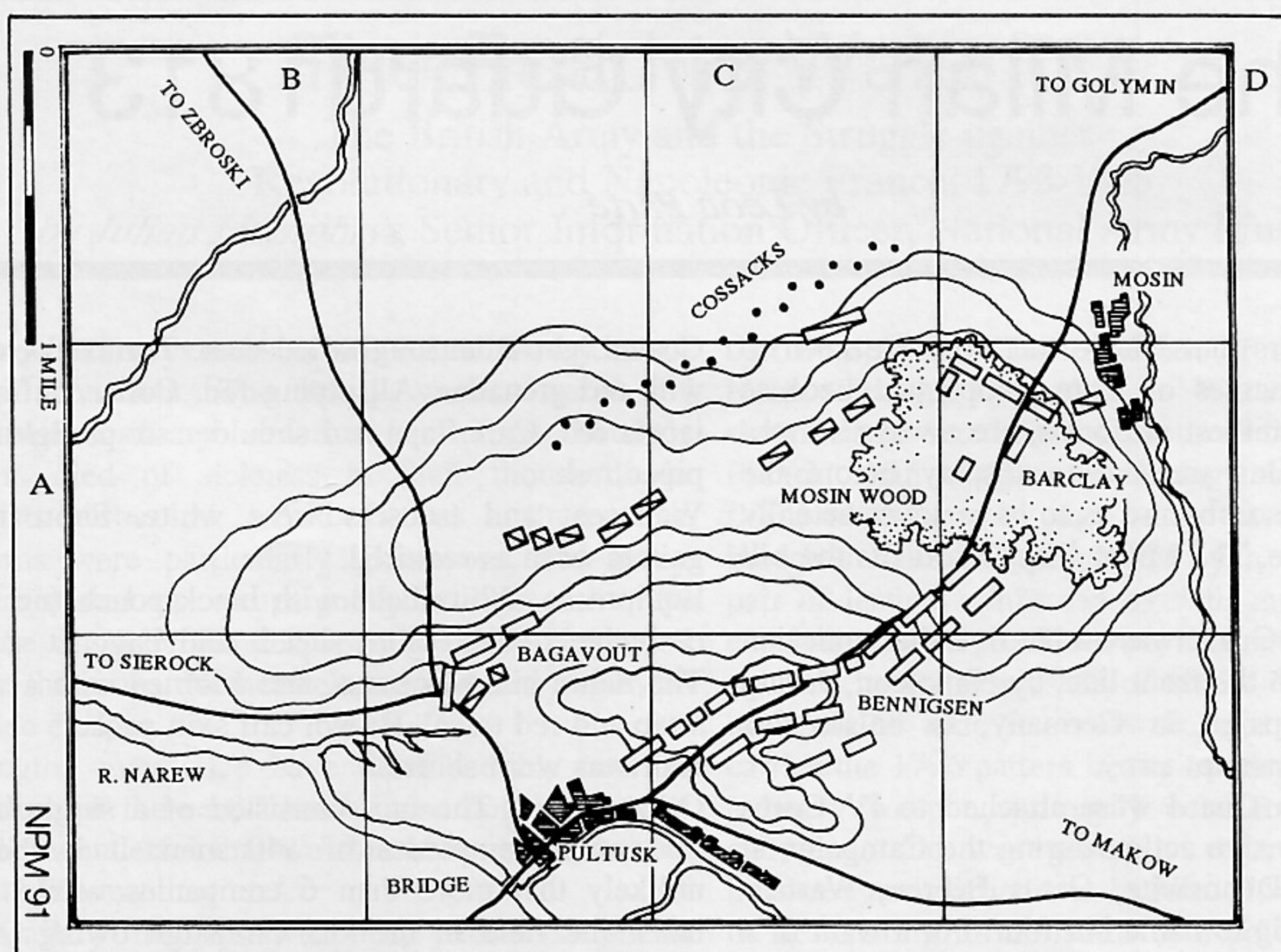
Perm Musketeer Regiment

Mohilev Musketeer Regiment

Sievsk Musketeer Regiment

23rd Jager Regiment

24th Jager Regiment



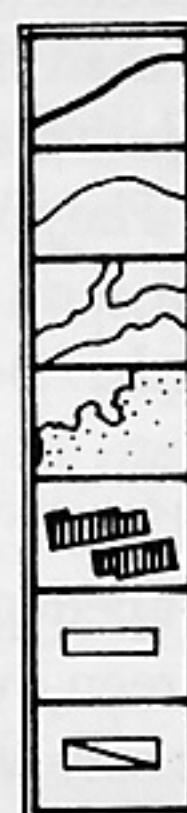
BATTLE OF PULTUSK. INITIAL RUSSIAN DEPLOYMENT 10.3 A.M.

2 Position Artillery Batteries - 28 cannon
 5 Light Foot Artillery Batteries - 70 cannon
 2-1/2 Horse Artillery Batteries - 30 cannon
 Divisional Cavalry (4500-5000 men)
 Major General Koschin
 Polish Uhlan Regiment - 10 squadrons
 Two Hussar Regiments - 20 squadrons
 Four Heavy Cavalry Regiments - 20 squadrons
 Cossacks (3000-4000 men)
 6-8 Pulks
 Totals Infantry 31500-38100 men
 Cavalry 4500-5000 men
 Artillery 3200 men - 128 cannon
 39200-46300 men
 Cossacks 3000-4000 men

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LEGEND



MAJOR ROAD
 CONTOUR
 RIVER / STREAM
 WOOD
 BUILT UP AREA
 RUSSIAN INFANTRY
 RUSSIAN CAVALRY

FRENCH POINTS OF ENTRY

11.00 AM
 A CLAPAREDE
 B WEDELL AND TREILHARD
 C SUCHET AND BECKER

11.30 AM
 C GAZAN

2.00 PM
 D D'AULTANNE

LANNES IS INITIALLY WITH WEDELL THEN JOINS SUCHET