

The General Vandamme: between crime, glory and art

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I. Abstract

Today we talk about a controversial figure, little known in the mosaic of the Napoleonic epic, but extremely intriguing. Given the few elements that we, the prosperity, have on his figure, I tried to make a psycho-characteristic portrait of the person, finding some extremely recurring elements during his life.



Dominique Vandamme was a soldier characterized by a polarizing duality: on one side, his impressive combat skills, composed of bravery, aggressiveness, efficiency, and severity, that allowed him to climb the ranks of the Army. On the other side, a constant stain that obscures and hinders his glories on the battlefields due to his choleric, irascible, and violent personality; which

will lead him to commit acts of ferocity against the conquered populations and to create enemies on both sides among his comrades. This lethal combination makes him an unmanageable and a man impossible to cope with, but at the same time vital and required for the military machine of the Empire.

His hardness and uncontrollability is well exemplified by Napoleon, who once arrested him personally for twenty-four hours, because he had seized the mayor's house, the city of his command headquarters, assuming that it was his right. After the episode, he observed that: *"If I have had two Vandamme, I would have had to order one to hang the other"*.

This is a character so much above the lines, but fascinating, that captured on August 30, 1813, at Kulm, gives life to a scene worthy of a theatrical opera: Dragged in front of Tsar Alexander of Russia (1777-1825) and his brother, the Grand Duke Constantine (1779-1831). Constantine would have ripped the sword from the side of the general, a bad insult to the chivalric code. Vandamme, indignant for this procedure, exclaimed: *"My sword is easy to take here, it would have been nobler to come and take it on the battlefield, but it seems that you only like trophies that don't cost you anything. At a good price!"*.



Hearing these words, Tsar Alexander of Russia, a man venerated and blessed, who ruled over 45 million liegemen, furious, ordered the arrest of the General, to whom he gave the epithets of looter and brigand. Denominations were given to him due to his reputation and cruelty with which he treated the inhabitants of various places conquered during the Napoleonic campaigns; where, in the one in Russia of 1812, led to the defeat of Napoleon's Grand Army and to the disintegration of his empire that, now 1813, seeks to defend from the 6th Coalition.

Vandamme, a very cunning man, with a sharp evilness, from an irascible and irritable character; looking at Alexander with proud disdain, replied: *"I am neither a plunderer nor a brigand, but a soldier, anyway, my contemporaries and history will not reproach me for having stained my hands with my father's blood!"* referring to the rumor that circulated about his involvement in the murder of Tsar Paul I (1754-1801). This event is a mirror of the most total disregard, fearlessness, and recklessness, at times chivalrous, at times bloody and kleptocrat, of his way of operating.

From the fields of Germany he was transported to Moscow. In his imprisonment, it seems he was treated with particular rigidity; finally, he was released in July 1814, following the abdication of the Emperor. Returning to France, his fame and parable of enmities do not lessen: since he was prohibited from entering Paris and was exiled to Cassel by Louis XVIII, who was horrified by his reputation. Inizio modulo

II. Ville Natale



Dominique was born and died in Cassel, a small town in the north of France, located in the hinterland of Dunkirk, a few kilometers from the frontier with Belgium. This circular cycle is a strong index of the visceral bond that Vandamme has with his hometown. He will cultivate it throughout his life and will return to it rhythmically as a safe place from the chaos that he himself creates.

Dominique Joseph René Vandamme, son of a surgeon, was born in the winter of 1770, precisely on November 5th. He must have had a difficult family, rigid and extremely severe, crossing a hard childhood and a firm adolescence. His parents must have had a very clear idea of what their son would do, or they used it as an extreme solution to temper his rebellion against every discipline. For the reason that, at the tender age of 15, he entered the military school of Marshal de

Biron. Immediately after, he was incorporated as a soldier in the 4th auxiliary battalion of the colonies in 1788. This treatment creates in the adolescent Dominique a persona that, on one side, represses emotions in formalism and military rigor; but on the other side, the same militarism, allows him as a vehicle of venting, as it is instrumentally useful for the purposes of conquest, to demonstrate ferocious brutality and ruthlessness towards the adversary and the cities conquered, which too often resulted in criminal abuses of plunder.

He was sent to Martinique the following year, in 1789: it was a French slave colony in the Caribbean Sea, an island located off the coast of Venezuela, immersed in a tropical climate. This is a context where violence is the tool of power to subjugate populations, migrated from Africa, to dehydrate them as labor force. It is a place of intense exploitation and mechanization, both of natural resources, and of manual force to extract raw materials from the ground. Subsequently, they were sent to Europe, to be transformed by industry into goods, sold on the market and consumed in Western salons. It is a place where coercion and oppression are at the base of the production system. Sufferings, oppressions and arrogance are everyday life on the colonial island with a paradisiacal climate. Therefore, it is in this environment that they all emerge the elements that will consolidate his carnivorous method of military operation.

Moreover, given his tender age, which absorbs as a relational modality what he observes as an example in others. But soon, with the revolution that was gaining momentum in France, the 20-year-old Dominique deserted in 1790 to return to his homeland.

III. The Fearless



Returned to France in 1791, it was in Cassel, at the height of the revolutionary period, that he accomplished his first major military feat, recruiting himself seven hundred men from the North to form a volunteer hunters' company. Under his command and composed "by hand", the Mont-Cassel hunters' company would allow the forces of the very young French Republic to win, on September 8, 1793, the battle of Hondschoote, near Bergues (twenty kilometers from his home). These are the first steps that the Revolution makes, trying to stand up, under the weight of a coalition of five monarchical states, created following the deposal (September 21, 1792) and beheading of Louis XVI (January 21, 1793).

From the start, his impressive tactical capabilities, maneuvering qualities, and the fierce impetus with which he urges his troops, the young Battalion Chief, are noticeable. Following this military endeavor, on September 23, Vandamme was promoted to Brigade General. From this moment on, he dedicates himself

entirely to military life, pursuing it through the combination of an explosive character, unbridled ambition, and unwavering commitment.

However, concurrently with this ascent, the Jacobin hierarchy, distrustful of his ambitions and brutal methods, starts creating a pit for him, where his career stagnates for several years.

The Relationship with Napoleon



His career unfolds thanks to the pragmatic eye of a man even more ambitious than him: upon Vandamme's request, he met with the glorious army general, just returned from the Italian campaign (1796/97), Napoleon Bonaparte. The two became friends immediately, probably because of the common sense of ambition and trust in militarism as a tool of power. Bonaparte will always have a keen eye for sniffing out people who had enormous potential and could be of support to him for the its climb, even in their defects. The two cultivated a unique relationship, with each having quotes about the other.

Napoleon once said: *"If I had to make war against the devil, I would send him there. He is the only one capable of making him come to his senses"*.

Vandamme, on the other hand, expressed himself, with a lively poetic tone, in this way towards Napoleon: *"So, it is that I, who do not fear, neither God, nor the devil, tremble like a child when I approach him"*.

It was thus that, on February 5th, 1799, at just 29 years old, the Brigade General was promoted to Division General. This is only the first of the many recognitions that Napoleon will confer on him:

- Welcomed on his return from the campaign of 1800, in the most flattering way from his friend Bonaparte (who had become First Consul), he received a pair of magnificent pistols from the Versailles factory.
- Appointed a member of the Legion of Honor on Frimaire 12 (December 11, 1803).
- Appointed Grand Officer of the Order on the following Pratile 25 (June 14, 1804).
- On October 22, 1806, he was appointed Grand Cross of the Royal Order of the Netherlands and Frederick of Württemberg

appointed him Grand Cross of the Military Order of Württemberg.

- In 1808, he was created count of Unsebourg.

This consolidated a very strong devotion and admiration on his part, towards the course, to whom, only to him, he submitted and obeyed unconditionally. On his side, the rewards were not undeserved; since, for his Emperor, he fought for a long time, all over Europe, bringing one victory after another, which expanded the Empire and the dominion of France.

For example, it was fundamental his contribution to the battle that sanctioned the international affirmation of Napoleon's kingdom, which happened exactly one year after his coronation at Notre Dame (December 2, 1804); the Battle of the Three Emperors, the masterpiece of Bonaparte's strategy: the Battle of Austerlitz (December 2, 1805).

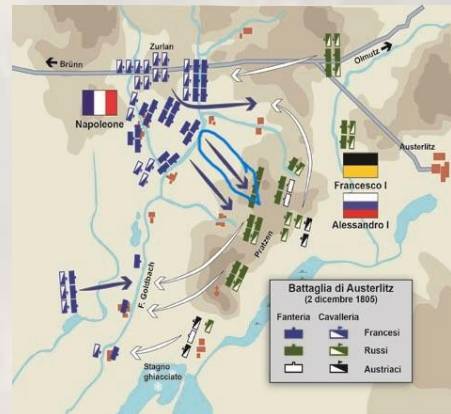
On this occasion, alongside Marshal Soult, it is exactly the Vandamme's division that is entrusted with attacking the heart of the Austro-Russian army. But to describe the supreme moment, I go quiet, and I leave the word to Lev Tolstoy who describes it so, in *War and Peace*, that moment:

"It was nine in the morning. Below, the fog stretched out like a compact sea, but near the village of Schlapanitz, on the hill where Napoleon was, surrounded by his marshals, it was perfectly clear. Above him there was a clear and azure sky, and the enormous sphere of the sun, like an enormous purple boa, floated on the surface of a milky sea of fog. [...] It was so close to our (Russian) troops [...] could distinguish with the naked eye, in our army, a knight from a foot soldier. Napoleon was a little ahead of his marshals, on a small gray Arab horse [...]. In silence he was looking at the hills that seemed to emerge from the sea of fog and on which in the distance the Russian troops were moving, and he was listening to the volleys of firing in the little valley [...]. His assumptions had proven correct. Some Russian troops had already descended into the little valley, heading towards the ponds and lakes, some were evacuating those heights of Pratzen that he intended to attack and considered key. [...] Pratzen was already sufficiently weakened so that it could be attacked successfully. But still he was not engaging in battle.

That was a solemn day for him: the anniversary of his coronation. [...] When the sun completely emerged from the fog and sprinkled a blinding flash on the fields and the fog, as if it had been waiting only for this to start the action, Napoleon took off a glove from his beautiful white hand, made a sign to the marshals and gave the order to start. The marshals, accompanied by the aides-de-camp, galloped in various directions, and after a few minutes the main part of the French army moved quickly."

And it is precisely the Vandamme's division on the left, and that of Saint-Hilaire on the right (of the IV Army Corps of Marshal Soult), that moved, immersing themselves and disappearing in the winter fog lying on the battlefield plain, to attack ascending on the Pratzen plateau. In that strategic position, voluntarily left to the enemies by Napoleon, was the

headquarters with Emperor Francis of Austria and Tsar Alexander practically bare, since the bulk of their troops had descended from the Pratzen plateau moving towards the right flank of the French (the little valley towards the ponds and lakes), also voluntarily left unprotected by Napoleon, to make them fall into the trap. The two emperors and all the golden state major were completely caught off guard to see Vandamme, with saber unsheathed who urged with impetuosity his columns in march, burst out from the dense fog of the plain just a few hundred meters from them, when they thought they were from somewhere else. That was the decisive move that, cutting the head off the snake, broke the third coalition and gave victory to the French. Consecrating the rising Empire, heir of that Roman of Charlemagne, with an absolute victory.



The numbers speak clearly, the army of the Emperor, Corsican, son of nobody, strong with 73,000 men and 139 cannons, annihilates the forces of the two strongest and oldest empires in Europe, loaded with 85,700 men and 278 cannons. The approximately 8,300 French losses do not even remotely equal the 25,000, among the dead and wounded, and the 12,000 prisoners of the coalition. Well, 180 cannons were captured, and will be melted to forge the Vendôme column of Paris, tribute to the victories of Napoleon to the image of the Trajan Imperial column.

After the battle, Napoleon took care of the wounded enemy soldiers on the field: he would have distributed some brandy, used comforting words and lit some fires to warm them waiting for help. But he had even more care for his men: *"I will do everything in my power to reward adequately all these brave men!"*. The day after the battle he praised them with the following words: *"Soldiers, I am happy with you; you have, in the day of Austerlitz, satisfied everything I expected from your courage. You have decorated your eagles with an immortal glory. An army of a hundred thousand men, commanded by the emperors of Russia and Austria, has been beaten or scattered in less than four hours; who has escaped your iron is drowned in the lakes [...]"*. The rewards were ample: to all the wounded were given 3 napoleons, to all the soldiers participating a napoleon each, to all the generals 3000 francs, to the widows of the fallen generals and officers 6000 to 1200 francs vital annuity and to Vandamme, the decisive protagonist, on the 3 Nevoso (December 24, 1805), he received the dignity of Great Eagle, as well as one of the lands and a residence in the island of Cadzand (Netherlands).

Subsequently, he will be then surgical in the capture of various Prussian fortresses in the campaign of the following year (5 successful sieges from November 7, 1806 to June 23, 1807). And just as fundamental he will be in the campaign of 1809 which will lead to the victory of Wagram and the second occupation of Vienna by the French.

IV. The Brute



In parallel to these glorious deeds mentioned above, however, Vandamme has another side more cruel, criminal and delinquent, that continuously can not be overlooked, since it will bring him in front of courts and dismissals.

In 1793, under the command of his Mont-Cassel hunters, he was accused of acts of violence against the inhabitants of the Flanders and of terrible reprisals against the emigrants taken in arms. This indelible stain will take him the following year, despite the services rendered, led him to be denounced as a terrorist who delivered Furnes to the predatory looting of the civilians, with robberies, fires and executions. Because of this, he fell into disgrace, but on the 25th of Prairial of the year III (June 13, 1795) he was reformed.

Subsequently, for only 4 months, from February to May of 1799, following the intercession of Bonaparte, he commanded a division and then left the command on May 14th, due to the accusations brought against him. Vandamme was accused of imposing contributions to the citizens of Württemberg for his personal profit and of having tolerated inappropriate appropriations of others under his command. Being a serious violation of the military code, the case was transferred to be judged by a military court. He returned to Paris to defend himself, but the court never met. This happened because in the middle there was the coup of 18 Brumaire, which brought General Bonaparte to the triumvirate consulate, causing the fall of the Directory government and the accusations.

On August 17th, 1800, he was accused this time of abuses and administrative irregularities. He was dismissed again, but for a very short time, since he was assigned to the Swiss army under the orders of Macdonald.

Therefore, we can only imagine what could have happened to the populations of the five strongholds besieged, in the Prussian campaign of 1806 - looting, robberies, fires, rapes, executions, plundering and destruction - or even more generally, we can only imagine what all the various villages had to go through, where his divisions were stationed during the campaigns.

All this will give him the reputation of brutal and bloodthirsty and will make him a much hated general by the enemies of France. Indeed, this is noticeable from the treatment he will receive once finally captured: riddled with wounds, at Kulm in 1813.

V. The Unmanageable



In addition, Vandamme will always be a victim of his awful temper, which will interfere with his career ascension. His irascible way, always descending in raging fits, his inability to subordinate himself to his superiors, will lead to constant conflicts with his commanders and a subsequent, necessary, transfer to another department. From which, in a short time, he will rebuild a scorched earth, arguing and clashing with the comrades.

A case that stands out is when, in 1808, put in charge of the field of Boulogne, a general of his subordinate, Jean Sarrazin, deserted shortly after his arrival. This highlights his extreme and brutal methods, so that the only way out, in his oppressive way, is desertion. Another case that highlights even better his intolerability, occurs in 1812 at the dawn of the campaign in Russia. Vandamme, appointed deputy commander of the VIII Corps of Westphalia under Jérôme Bonaparte, was dismissed from the army on August 6, due to violent controversies with Jérôme. The Emperor, taking sides with the brother, was forced to implement the extreme measure, this prevented him from participating in the campaign, remaining inactive for almost a year.

All these squabbles and clashes will give him the reputation of intolerable and uncontrollable, making him the unbearable and generally avoidable general of the Army. Indeed, this can be noticed from the approximate table, which I have reconstructed by crossing the sources, where are shown all the transfers he made from 1794 to the moment of capture (this excludes the first years and the hundred days):

April 1794	Joined the Moreau Division	Accused of violence
April - June 1795	Transferred to the Sambre and Mosa Army	Removed from command for his comments on countries conquered by the French Republic
May 1796	Assigned to the 7th division of Duhesme	
April 1798	Designed for the England Army	
September 1798	Enlisted in the Mainz Army	
February to May 1799	Took command of a division of the Danube Army under Gouvion St. Cyr.	Accused of imposing contributions to civilians
September 1799	Sent to the Dutch Army under Brune	
February 1800	Enlisted in the Rhine Army	Accused of administrative irregularities
September 1800	Sent to the Swiss Army under Macdonald	
August 1803 – Summer 1806	Commanded the 2nd Division at the Saint-Omer camp, then part of the IV Corps of Marshal Soult	Replaced in command due to disagreements with his commander
October 1806	3rd division of the VI corps of Marshal Ney	
June 1807	Returned to command of the 16th military division	

1808	Received command of the Boulogne field	
March 1809	Took command of the VIII Corps of the Grande Armée	
Beginning 1810	Reappointed commander of the Boulogne field	Arrested for 24 hours by Napoleon himself
In 1811	Commanded various positions along the coast	Movements due to disputes
January - July 1812	Appointed deputy commander of the VIII Corps of Westphalia under Jérôme Bonaparte.	Dismissed for disputes with the superior
March 1813	Took command of two divisions	
July - August 1813	Took command of the I Corps	Captured at Kulm

VI. The Frigate



We have faced his connection with his hometown, his detestable character, which leads him to create enemies both inside and outside France. Consequently, Vandamme would have lived a life in perpetual 'enemy territory', constantly surrounded by a hostile environment... but there is something even deeper in his relationship with Cassel.

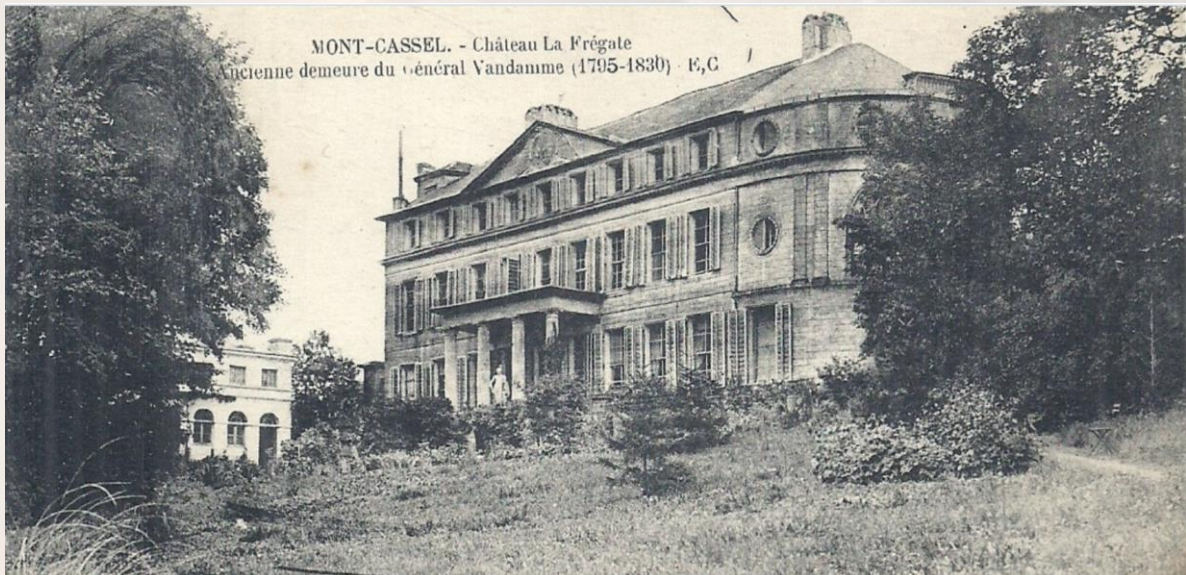
We might think that a soldier with such a reputation would be a simple, rough, and intellectually lively person. But instead, by diving into that environment that is most his and intimate, namely Cassel, we discover an aspect of his that is apparently inconceivable and incompatible with his actions, opening a window on a side of him, which makes the character of Dominique, polyhedral and even more fascinating:

On February 1, 1794, he bought in his hometown, from Pierre-Alexandre de Magnac, the superior of the collegiate of Saint Pierre, an ancient ecclesiastical residence, which became national property with the expropriations of the Revolution. This will be his home for the next 35 years and Vandamme will put all himself into it, indeed, over the years he has completely transformed the old bourgeois building. In 1810 he added a wooden floor, oblong windows and rounded ends that gave him the look of a ship. These additions and constructions are unique at the time. These are the particularities, which gave the name to the castle '*La Frégate*'.

With good weather it is possible to see the English coast to the north, thanks to a belvedere. On the south side, a colonnade is crowned by a pediment decorated with the imperial eagle. Inside the decorations are sumptuous, made of marble, woodwork and tapestries. The outside is just as magnificent, its slope offers a free view of the Flemish region, the English-style garden, has long amazed visitors. So it describes Hyacinthe Corne, in a testimony reported:

"If a wicked man can be a great general, he can also be a man of good taste, and Vandamme has shown how to draw from the admirable position of his properties. The park, of which he is the designer, located on the top and on the slope of the mountain, presents the most varied and picturesque aspect that one can imagine. It is designed with such art that at every turn of the path, under the bush and on the edge of every pond, the view changes and offers a completely different perspective. It is always the same plain that opens to the eyes of the spectator, but the landscapes are so well managed that one would believe at every step of discovering new landscapes and the park walls are so skillfully disguised that it seems there are no other boundaries except those of the horizon. We find in this magnificent property all the embellishments that we could bring to a nature already so rich in its own beauty. Ponds, green tree patches, meadows, graceful pavilions, games of all kinds combine, with the magnificence of the site, to make it a fascinating and worthy residence..."

(Voix du Nord magazine, article of June 2, 1983, Michel Marcq)



And so, we complete the picture of his relationship with the city. The Frégate becomes his paradise corner, where to cultivates peace and harmony, leaving the chaos, violence and enmities to the outside, which he creates. That residence becomes what he has of most precious, his intimate refuge. Therefore, it is so that when everything collapses, and there is no longer the guarantor of the Empire, his detractors and enemies fall on his goods, as he had fallen on those of others:

The castle was looted in February 1814 (a little before the abdication of Fontainebleau, when the French territory was already invaded) by the Cossacks of Russian general Geismar, who wanted to avenge the appropriation of the previous year by Vandamme of three hundred thousand francs and a pair of silver eagles. A first expedition allowed to start with a cart loaded with wine and it is said that there were not many bottles left when they arrived in Hazebrouck. The next day, nothing was spared:

"His troops took and took away a cutting cart and a coach, several fireplaces, lamps, many covers, etc... The portrait of the general was cut with

saber blows. When they left, the commander told the servants that they still had a day to put aside everything they wanted to save, that they would return with great force to set fire to the house. The loss and damage are estimated from 10 to 12.000 francs." (Flemish Committee Bulletin, year 1924, 3rd edition).

VII. Vive L'Empereur



Therefore, the inside of the nest, is the place of rigor and submissiveness, for the family context, but it is also the safe place where you can have that heat and tranquility, *'La Frégate'*. Conversely, symmetrically, the outside, what is external to the birthplace, is a brutal place of relief and hunting, inserted in a mechanism that allows you to express this cannibalistic irascibility systematically, given the period, characterized by the twenty years of Napoleonic wars. Despite this, Vandamme is a figure so stormy and irascible, that it becomes damaging and intolerable even for the same system, leading him to conflicts with subordinates and superiors who create enemies from all sides. Finally, his ferocity reflects, at the same time, in efficiency, blind courage and ability in his duty, driven by the predatory appetite for relief, which makes him a good general in battle.

His turbulent character was so much an obstacle that, until the end, despite his undoubted abilities, he was denied the Marshal's staff (the highest military French distinction) because of his rough ways, inability to collaborate and coordinated work.

But how does his story end? We remained in his exile following the restoration of Louis XVIII:



Even in the last act of the Napoleonic epic, Vandamme proved his detestable character. In March 1815, Bonaparte escaped from Elba and regained the throne of France without even firing a shot. The dethroned general from the Bourbon monarchy, went immediately to Paris, and presented himself to the emperor who, on June 2nd, appointed him a peer of France and commander of the II division. He thus took part in the adventure of the hundred days, but did not accept to be put under the orders of Grouchy, newly elected and last of the Marshals of France of the first empire. The general believes he has more rights than him in the role and will show his dissatisfaction giving proof of his famous bad spirit, with continuous criticisms and refusals.

Following the defeat of Waterloo (June 18th, 1815), which sanctions the definitive farewell of the Emperor from the European soil, in August 1815, always on the trail of the enmities that he had created, a crowd of Cassel invaded for the

first time the property and stole wine. The next month, with various pretexts, a large crowd invaded the property again. The mayor asked for the intervention of the army to prevent looting, but too few soldiers arrived and the small troop was soon in difficulty until the arrival of reinforcements, which dispersed the movement.

After the defeat he was expelled and retired to the United States, but he could return to France in 1819. He died alone, on July 15th, 1830 in Cassel in his house.

I will conclude with a description of a part of the Château, which I believe fully represents the person of Vandamme; always Hyacinthe Corne, describes like this the stables:

"... And it can be said that General Vandamme lodged his horses better than himself. Indeed, he had a palace built, at most, worthy of the horses of Achilles, in honor of their divine origin, or of the immortal Bucephalus, or even of the most illustrious of the couriers. The stables, numbering twenty-four, each destined to accommodate a horse, are all of black marble, as are the troughs. The floor itself was of marble; we had to replace a paved with a simpler, but more convenient one. A dome, in the shape of a lantern, illuminates the vast building. In the background a pump that spits water through a bronze horse head perfectly worked. A stable and a hayloft, decorated with colored windows, complete this magnificent stable. **It can captivate for a moment the curiosity of the traveler, but in front of reason, such an extravagant luxury for the accommodation of animals is only a subtle theft committed against poverty. It does not seduce reason like the eyes.**"

A subtle theft, of many that he committed in his career around Europe, bringing poverty, violence and subtracting a wealth with which he created his inner paradise. A charm that undoubtedly seduces the eyes, but not the reason and morality in front of criminal acts.

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