

Illusion of History

Part 1: War and the building of nations

The Franco-Prussian War lasted from July 1870 to February 1871, ending with a final defeat for France. The most modern technology of that time was deployed by Germany in this war. In contrast, the troops under the command of the French General Bourbaki were France's last reserve. In the cold of January 1871 they were surrounded by German troops in the Jura. Bourbaki attempted to commit suicide; his troops were disarmed and sought internment in Switzerland. As a result of this war, the triumphant German States were united and became a German nation-state under Prussian rule, France changed from an empire to a republic and Switzerland reinforced its foreign policy regarding neutrality.

1. How did the Franco-Prussian War come to be?

The cause of the Franco-Prussian War was closely linked with the efforts on the part of the folk to form their own nation-states. While Spain, France and England had already laid the cornerstones of their nation-states long ago – in the Late Middle Ages, the process of which was essentially concluded following the French Revolution and Napoleon – the states of Central Europe (except the Slavic) established their national sovereignty between 1848 and 1871. Following Switzerland and Italy, the Germans also wanted to form their own state. But where exactly were Germany's borders, and which one of the 35 German sovereign states would lead the new, unified entity? The answers to these questions arose from the Franco-Prussian War. But how did this war come to be?

The immediate cause of the Franco-Prussian War was triggered by the dispute concerning the succession to the Spanish throne in 1870. Subsequent to the deposition of Queen Isabella II, the Spanish officials wanted Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, a distant Catholic relative of the Prussian king, as the new monarch. Panic broke out in France, for the French feared that such an alliance with the German dynasty would upset the balance of power in Europe. Although the French government was successful in persuading Leopold to withdraw his acceptance of claiming the throne, it was not yet satisfied with that. It sent an ambassador to meet with the Prussian king in Bad Ems, demanding from him a guarantee that no member of his Hohenzollern family would ever make claim to the Spanish throne again. A report of this meeting, referred to as the "Ems Dispatch", was passed on to Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck via telegraph. He reacted to this alleged humiliation of Germany by editing the telegram in such a manner that its effect was highly insulting for France and released this version to the press. Napoleon III was so outraged that he declared war on the Prussia.

Bismarck's editing of the telegram was indeed deliberate, for now in the eyes of the world, France would be seen as the aggressor, thus improving Prussia's standing internationally. While Great Britain and Russia maintained a neutral position, Bismarck called on the

existing mutual defense alliances (North German Confederation and several of the South German states of Württemberg, Bavaria and Baden) and thus achieved his national goal: a small “German Reich” (without Austria) under Prussian banner. With Germany’s victory, the border between Germany and France was newly drawn. The defeated France had to cede its predominantly German-speaking provinces (again): the Alsace and a part of Lorraine.



→ Fig. 1: Racist German caricature during the war - a Turco (an Algerian serving in the infantry of the French army) in combat with a Prussian

2. Course of events

From the start, the German troops had a clear advantage, particularly due to faster mobilization and superior command. Following losses in battles near Wissembourg, Woërrth, Vionville and Gravelotte, the French troops suffered the decisive defeat near Sedan on 1/2 September 1870. Sedan capitulated one day thereafter. Among the 100,000 French prisoners of war was also the French Emperor, Napoleon III.

When the news of Napoleon’s III capture hit Paris, the empire was overthrown, the Third Republic proclaimed and a “Government of National Defense” established to continue offering resistance.

The Germans recommenced combat. The siege of Paris, the French capital city, began on 19 September; the cordon of approximately 82 kilometers closed in on it daily. By mobilizing all of its resources, the French succeeded in summoning a large number of new soldiers outside the city; these forces were to breach the siege. Within just 3 1/2 months, 600,000 men were newly levied and supplied with blankets and clothing! Military success failed to materialize for the French, however, because the politicians hastily pressed for action, without properly preparing the troops: equipment, weapons and training were all lacking.

Towards the end of 1870, an attempt was made to relocate the scene of the war. The remainder of the Loire army, as well as newly levied units, formed the French Eastern Army under the command of General Charles Denis Bourbaki. Its task was to liberate the Belfort fortification from German siege and then cut the German supply lines from the south. Although General Bourbaki’s Army was strong in numbers – with 130,000 men – it was hastily

thrown together, essentially uncoordinated and, well, the last intact unit of the French army. It failed to break through German lines. At the end of January 1871, it was forced to retreat to the Swiss border and was surrounded by the Germans. With no way out, it sought internment in Switzerland. From 1 to 3 February 1871, it crossed the Swiss border with 87,000 soldiers and officers along the Vaud and Neuenburg regions of the Jura, was disarmed and provided refuge in Switzerland.

As early as 18 January 1871, the Germans proclaimed the Second German Empire in the Palace of Versailles.

On 27 January 1871, Strasbourg fell; shortly thereafter, the Bazaine Army in Metz – with approximately 193,000 men – also surrendered. After a four-month siege, the citizens of Paris capitulated on 28 January 1871. On 10 May 1871, following protracted negotiations, a peace treaty between the warring parties was concluded.

3. Deployment of the Bourbaki Army

December 1870: France favoured a new plan to relocate the scene of the war. Parts of the Loire Army, which battled unsuccessfully south of Paris, would now be deployed in Dijon to liberate the beleaguered Belfort and cut the rear echelon of German supply lines advancing on Paris. Command of this new Eastern Army for France was assigned to General Charles Denis Bourbaki.

First victory in combat in Villersexel.

Three-day battle near the Lisaine River, ca. 20 km north of the Swiss border near Belfort against German corps under the command of General Werder. The Bourbaki Army was forced to discontinue the battle – in spite of the fact that it outnumbered the Germans.

The demoralized French troops (Bourbaki Army) disbanded during the retreat in the direction of Besançon.

German forces, under the command of General Manteuffel, attacked the Bourbaki Army on the flank. The only way out for the French soldiers remained the railway line to Pontarlier, near the Swiss border.

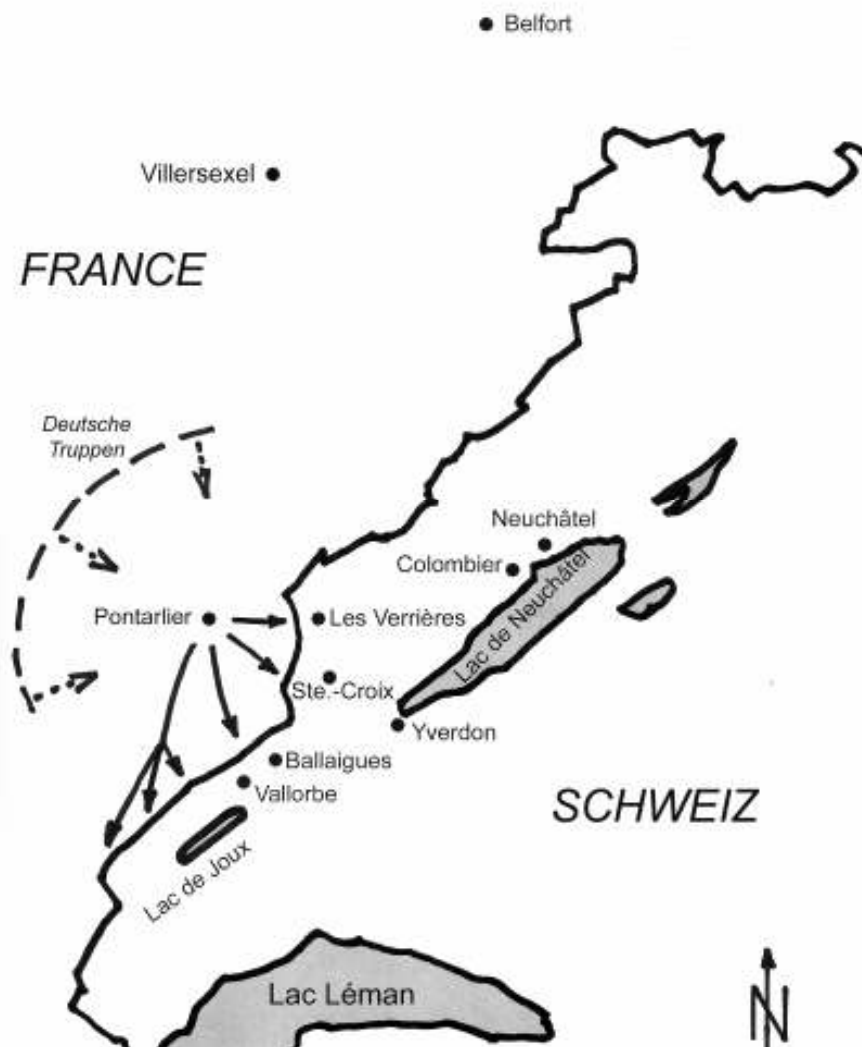
Faced with such a hopeless situation, General Bourbaki attempted to take commit suicide. Command of the Bourbaki Army was handed over to Justin Clinchant.

On 29 January 1871 an armistice was signed in Versailles which expressly stated the exclusion of the areas involving the Bourbaki Army. Unfortunately, General Clinchant was not informed of this exception and, unaware of the situation, ordered the combat operations to cease. The German General Manteuffel took advantage of the confusion in France, blocking all of the major roads and surrounding the Bourbaki Army in the vicinity of Pontarlier. Although General Clinchant was surprised by the ensuing incidents, he was not about to let

his troops march into captivity as German prisoners of war and opted for the last resort: to cross the border into Switzerland and seek internment.

The Bourbaki Army crossed into Switzerland at various locations along the Vaud and Neuenburg border, at the following main routes:

Les Verrières	(34,000 men)
Ste-Croix	(13,000 men)
Vallorbe and Ballaigues	(28,000 men)
Further routes, particularly in Vallée de Joux	(12,000 men)



→ Fig. 2: Locations of the crossing of the Bourbaki Army

4. France: from empire to republic

Due to centralization and a standardized language, state and culture had already united in France to form a new entity before 1789; it would later be referred to as the nation-state. The French Revolution enabled the folk to claim self-determination inwardly and independence outwardly. Republic and monarchy alternated continuously thereafter.

The Franco-Prussian War marked a change from an empire to a republic once again. During the war, Emperor Napoleon III was overthrown in a revolution in 1870, fell in German captivity and went into exile. In France the Third Republic was proclaimed, which would last the longest in the history of France: until 1940, when Germany marched into France again during the Second World War.

The savage repression of the Paris Commune in May 1871 was also a domestic consequence of the Franco-Prussian War. For the second time following the June Days Uprising in 1848, France quelled an insurgency of leftist circles in Paris: Jacobins, republicans, patriots, socialists, representatives of the international and anticlerical leftists – all from the long-beleaguered, despairing folk – which fought without a unified program. The new government seized the city from Versailles in May 1871. Nearly 30,000 Communards died in the bloody battles, thousands were thereafter sentenced to the galleys or sent into exile. Many of the victims found refuge in Switzerland.

5. Germany: united under Prussian rule

The territory comprising the former Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation involved an advanced civilization shaped by a common language. Although it had existed since the Middle Ages, political unity was lacking until the 19th century. From 1815-1866, 35 autonomous states and 4 cities belonged to a loose confederation called the “German Confederation”. In 1862 Otto v. Bismarck was declared Prime Minister of Prussia. Under his leadership, the German States won three wars: the Second Schleswig War of 1864, which led to Denmark’s cessation of Schleswig-Holstein to Prussia and Austria. The new territory was governed by the both Prussia and Austria. It was not without friction, however, resulting in the Austro-Prussian War (Prussia against Austria) in 1866. With the Prussian victory in the Battle of Königgrätz, Austria was ousted from Germany; thereafter Austria concentrated on southeast Europe (Danube Monarchy). In the North German Confederation, the German states – with the exception of Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria – joined forces then under Prussian banner in 1867. It was only with the Franco-Prussian War 1870/71 that Germany was unified (cf. S.1). The Prussian King, Wilhelm I, was crowned German Emperor in Versailles in January 1871 and the second German Empire was proclaimed. This resulted in the unification of the German Reich, led by Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, a nation-state and European power.

The proclamation of the German Reich was made in, of all places, the Palace of Versailles. The French were so humiliated by this act that, in June 1919, they had the defeat of the Germans in the First World War confirmed with the signing of the peace treaty at exactly the same location where the culmination had occurred in 1871.

6. Switzerland: establishing national identity

Because elements such as a common race or the same members of a tribe, a common language and customs which typically unified other nation-states were not present in Switzerland, the nation had to base its identity on other elements. The creation of a “collective consciousness” coincided with the emphasis of a democratic form, federalism, or the alleged common history. The “Old Swiss Confederacy” and the “Alps” were, for example, both a part of the national image of identity.

The collective experience concerning the internment of the Bourbaki soldiers gave rise to a further element in the fostering of national identity. It served as a catalyst, prompting the still rather young federal state of 1848 to develop into modern-day Switzerland. Ideas and concepts regarding the “nation of Switzerland” were reinforced or newly created: on the one hand, the need for a military component for the creation of the Swiss federal state was met during the internment of the Bourbaki soldiers in Switzerland to a certain degree; on the other hand, several deficiencies were also revealed in the organization of the army, particularly concerning logistics. The army was incapable of providing sufficient medical and veterinary services or food. It was not yet in a position to provide for its own troops, partly because it did not have its own horses or carts. Billeted soldiers had to be fed by civilians. While problems involving transport, namely with the railway, resulted in a new railway law already in 1872, it would take several more years before other deficiencies were eliminated: for example, the telegraph service. With the revision of the Federal Constitution in 1874, Switzerland coalesced even further. It became more centralized and standardized, tasks were clearly allocated and the basis was formed for eliminating the deficiencies discovered during the internment. From that time on, the confederacy had the competency to determine troop rank and regulate the training of the military. In addition, it decided centrally on armament. The militia principle had been preserved.

Many nations are formed through war incidents. This was not the case for Switzerland. Or was it? Switzerland did not originate as a result of a revolution or a liberating or unifying war, but rather through resolutions adopted by the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Nevertheless, wars influenced the emergence of Switzerland as a nation considerably. In view of national efforts of neighbouring states to unify during the second half of the 19th century, the emphasis on the fact that Switzerland decided to form a nation of its own free will, a “nation of consensus”, as it were, gained in importance. In order to avoid being disunited by the situation just over the border, the emphasis on neutrality presented itself. Hence, the Franco-Prussian War enabled Switzerland’s neutrality, or the interpretation thereof, to evolve more precisely. The internment of the Bourbaki Army showed that neutrality does not mean merely standing on the sidelines and observing. The possibility of offering neutral protection became an important element of national self-image. The aspect of providing



protection was further bolstered by the fact that the Red Cross was (and still is) based in Switzerland. Thus, the notion of neutrality acquired a humanitarian element – and solidarity became the trademark of the young federal state.