

## AN EXAMPLE OF HUMANITY

*The Revue militaire suisse (Lausanne, 1975, No. 10), contains a very interesting article on "General Dufour and the law of war" from the pen of a member of the staff of the ICRC, Mr. Frédéric de Mulinen. The author draws a character portrait of the man who, when appointed commander-in-chief of the Swiss Federal Army at the time of the conflict which divided the nation in 1847, showed such noble-mindedness that his attitude sets an example of humanity for us even today. General Dufour, incidentally, became the first president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, a few years later.*

*We therefore believe our readers will be interested in some extracts, which we reproduce below, of Mr. de Mulinen's article. In a few introductory paragraphs, Mr. de Mulinen mentions the work in progress to supplement the Geneva Conventions by Protocols and the need, after their adoption, to compile a synthesis and a summary of each of the various subjects dealt with, in order that army officers should be able to find swiftly and without any difficulty the questions with which they ought to be familiar.*

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General Guillaume-Henri Dufour, elected by the Federal Diet in 1847 to assume command of the federal army with the task of undoing by force the separatist alliance of the seven cantons (the "Sonderbund"), combined discipline of his troops with humanitarian imperatives, two vital requirements in a civil war. Three messages drafted by him bear witness to his lofty civic sense and to his ability to distinguish essentials and to convey, in the form most suitable to circumstances, to the several persons whom he was addressing what was important for them to know.

## I.

On 22 October 1847, the day after he was elected to take command of the federal army, General Dufour sent the Federal Diet the following letter, in which he announced his canons of conduct: <sup>1</sup>

While performing all that duty demands of me, I shall never depart from the path of moderation and humanity, should things come to a difficult pass; I shall not in any way lose sight of the fact that the controversy that has been engaged is between Confederates; I shall stand aloof from political passions; and, confining myself exclusively to my military assignment, I shall seek to maintain order and discipline among the federal troops, to ensure respect for public and private property, to protect the Catholic faith in the person of its clergy as well as its temples and religious institutions; in short, to do all in my power to mitigate the ills inherent in war. May then my loyalty be of profit to our common mother country! But may divine Providence rather spare it from the disasters with which it is threatened!

## II.

On 4 November 1847, General Dufour sent all divisional commanders detailed instructions as to the way they were to behave, should the occasion arise, towards the troops of the Sonderbund, or towards the inhabitants, in order to avoid, as much as possible, anything that might aggravate the evils of war: <sup>2</sup>

Do everything possible to refrain from engagements that will not lead to any result.

Enjoin the federal troops in the most pressing manner to conduct themselves with moderation and not to break out into acts of violence, which would only exacerbate a population we should rather seek to bring back into the fold through gentle treatment, in order to have fewer enemies to fight and reach a quicker solution. In particular, treat with redoubled consideration those hostages whom it might be necessary to take and make sure that they are well treated at headquarters; let them not lack anything.

Prevent at all costs damage to Catholic churches and religious establishments, in order to eradicate, if possible, the religious character which some people endeavour to attach to this war.

<sup>1</sup> Général G.-H. DUFOUR, *Campagne du Sonderbund et événements de 1847*, Genève 1876, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit., pp. 183-185.

## MISCELLANEOUS

Institute safeguards with the object of ensuring respect for the property of magistrates and public officials.

If enemy soldiers are driven back, take care of their wounded as if they belonged to our own forces; show for them all the consideration due to them in their misfortune.

Disarm prisoners but refrain from harming and abusing them. On the contrary, treat them as kindly as possible in order to win them over.

Allow them to return to their homes if they promise on their honour to discard their uniform and not take up arms again.

Should there occur acts of violence, let them not be on the part of our men; let there be no cause for any such reproaches against us. Should there be such acts, let all the odium be heaped on the adversary. Do not commit any reprisals of this kind; they would only harm our cause.

After an engagement, restrain the fury of our soldiers and spare the vanquished. No other conduct is more honourable in a victorious army; and in civil war there is nothing which wins over more surely the adversary. Inversely, nothing exasperates an adversary and goads him to resist to the bitter end as much as the opposite kind of conduct. However strong one may be, one should beware of driving the enemy to desperation.

Finally, when the fighting is ended, we shall all be thankful not to have lost sight of the fact that the struggle was between fellow Confederates and that we listened to the voice of compassion.

Let the superior officers apply themselves to instil those principles into the minds of their subordinates, who shall do the same to the lower-ranking officers, and similarly to the troops, so that they should become a law unto the entire federal army. Our troops must make every effort to demonstrate to the whole world that they are not just a rabble of barbarians.

### III.

On 5 November 1847, General Dufour spoke in person to the troops: <sup>1</sup>

Soldiers, Confederates !

After the Diet's proclamation, at this grave moment of our history, there are only just a few things I would like to say.

You have been called out from your quarters in order to execute the decrees of the highest authority of Switzerland. It has unfurled the

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<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., pp. 185-186.

national flag, under which every Confederate must gather: do not forget that your most sacred duty is to defend it with all your energies and at the cost of your blood.

Your intervention and the support of your arms are required to raise your country out of a situation of uncertainty and distress which cannot continue without plunging it in general ruin. It counts upon your loyalty; you will not betray its expectation.

Men! you must emerge not only victorious but also blameless from this struggle; it should be so that people will say of you: they fought valiantly when they were obliged, but they showed they were humane and great hearted.

I therefore place under your protection the children, the women, the aged and the ministers of religion. He among you who raises his hand against an innocent person will have dishonoured himself and besmirched his flag. The prisoners, and especially the wounded, deserve kind treatment and compassion on your part, all the more so as in many cases you and they were together in the same camps.

You shall not wilfully cause needless damage to crops and you shall willingly endure the temporary hardships that might be caused by the weather, despite the care taken to meet your needs. Your officers will share those difficulties with you; listen to what they have to tell you and follow their example. There often is more merit in enduring the trials and tribulations of a soldier's life than in displaying courage on the field of battle.

But if all turns out as I hope, the campaign will not last long, and you shall return to your homes with the satisfaction of having accomplished a worthy mission and rendered signal service to your country, by restoring its ability to ensure respect, whenever necessary, for its independence and neutrality.

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During the ensuing thirty-day campaign, General Dufour himself was the first to observe the clear and simple principles stated by him. The consequences were all for the good of Switzerland. With the defeat of the Sonderbund, the opposing parties were soon reconciled.

The example of humanity set by General Dufour spread well beyond the boundaries of his country...