

The arrival of Bourbaki's army at Les Verrières

The internment of the First French Army
in Switzerland on 1 February 1871

by François Bugnion

"The army is ready; not a gaiter button is lacking", declared Marshal Leboeuf, Napoleon III's Minister of War, when the funds needed for mobilization were being voted.

Rarely has such an ill-considered remark been made: the French army, poorly equipped, inadequately trained and, above all, incompetently led, was soon to suffer a succession of crushing defeats. As soon as the first clashes took place in August 1870 it was forced to abandon Alsace and Lorraine, save for a few strongholds — Strasbourg, Sélestat, Neuf-Brisach, Metz and Belfort — all of which remained under siege. On 2 September Napoleon III capitulated at Sedan with 80,000 men, bringing down the Second Empire, and the Prussians marched on Paris.

The Republic proclaimed on 4 September inherited a desperate situation: Paris was under siege from 18 September and the Government of National Defence was blockaded in the capital together with its best troops; Strasbourg, in flames, was forced to surrender on 28 September; and on 27 October Marshal Bazaine capitulated at Metz with 150,000 men, enabling the Prussians to reinforce the siege of Paris, where the hungry population soon began to suffer the effects of winter cold.¹

(Original French).

¹ Pierre Benaerts, Henri Hauser, Fernand L'Huillier and Jean Maurain, *Nationalité et nationalisme (1860-1878)*, new ed., Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 1968, pp. 198-209.

All eyes were now focused on Paris, whose fate would decide the outcome of the war. New troops from the provinces, hastily raised and barely equipped, were thrown into battle in an attempt to break the siege of the capital. Against all odds, the Army of the Loire met some success, driving the Bavarians from the field at Coulmiers on 9 November and then marching on Beaune-la-Rolande on 28 November before being forced back to the south. On 6 December, the Prussians occupied Orléans. Paris, meanwhile, was subjected to heavy artillery bombardment and morale plunged as conditions became more and more precarious: there was no fuel to heat the houses, any bread available was inedible and the butchers' stalls began to display siege fare — horse, donkey, dog, cat and rat.²

Having failed to lift the siege, the War Ministry, serving as general staff headquarters in name if not in competence, decided to try a diversion to the east and a new army was established from the remnants of the Army of the Loire. Its task was to relieve Belfort, the town commanding the route between the Vosges and the Jura, whose garrison had so far held the besieging forces in check. Success here would threaten the invaders' lines of communication and draw part of the Prussian army well away from Paris.³

Victorious at Villersexel on 9 January 1871, the Army of the East, commanded by General Bourbaki, came within firing range of Belfort before being halted on the Lisaine. The Prussians, though fewer in number, were far better trained and three days of fierce fighting (15-17 January) failed to dislodge them from their lines. Meanwhile, the German high command launched a devastating counter-move. A new force was raised from the troops besieging Paris and, avoiding Dijon, was dispatched to attack the Army of the East from the rear, threatening its supply lines and cutting off its retreat.⁴

With the French demoralized by a series of defeats and exhausted by two months of ceaseless march and countermarch, the now inevitable retreat soon turned into a rout. Struggling through Arctic conditions, the ragged and ill-shod army abandoned all semblance of discipline and sometimes even the will to survive. Many soldiers threw away their weapons and equipment; others lay down exhausted in the snow and

² *Ibid.*, pp. 209-216.

³ Colonel É. Secretan, *L'Armée de l'Est (20 décembre 1870-1^{er} février 1871)*, 2nd ed., Attinger Frères, Neuchâtel, 1894, pp. 26-48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-315.

expired by the roadside. Their horses, most of which had not been unharnessed for weeks, were reduced to skin and bone; they had not been shod for winter conditions and when they fell on the ice were unable to stand up again.

On 26 January, shattered by the disasters which had befallen his army, General Bourbaki put a gun to his head and attempted suicide. On the 28th, Jules Favre, Foreign Minister of the Government of National Defence, and Count Bismarck, Chancellor of the German Empire proclaimed a few days earlier in the Hall of Mirrors, signed an armistice at Versailles which led to a suspension of hostilities on all fronts. The Army of the East, however, was excluded from the armistice, an exception which further added to the confusion and disarray of the troops.⁵

Realizing that the war was now lost and seeing the Prussians cutting off his last lines of retreat, General Clinchant, the successor of the unfortunate Bourbaki, after a last attempt to break through the enemy encirclement, decided to request internment in Switzerland as the only alternative to capitulation.

At dawn on 1 February 1871, General Herzog, Commander in Chief of the Swiss army, and General Clinchant signed an agreement at the border post of Les Verrières, authorizing the Army of the East to enter Switzerland on condition that it laid down its arms (see box).⁶

The following terms have been agreed between General Herzog, Commander in Chief of the army of the Swiss Confederation, and General Clinchant, Commander in Chief of the First French Army:

- Art. 1 The French army requesting passage shall lay down its arms, equipment and munitions upon entry into Swiss territory.
- Art. 2 The said arms, equipment and munitions shall be returned to France after the peace and upon final settlement of the expenses incurred by the stay of the French troops in Switzerland.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 345-498.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 549-550; *Documents diplomatiques suisses* (1848-1945), vol. 2, Berne, 1985, p. 497; De Clerq, *Recueil des Traités de la France*, vol. X, p. 421; Clive Parry (ed.), *The Consolidated Treaty Series*, vol. 142, pp. 475-476.

- Art. 3 The same shall apply to artillery pieces and related munitions.
- Art. 4 Officers shall be allowed to keep their horses, arms and effects.
- Art. 5 Provision will be made subsequently for the horses of other ranks.
- Art. 6 After carriages bearing provisions and baggage have been unloaded, they shall return to France immediately, together with their drivers and horses.
- Art. 7 Paymaster and post carriages shall be delivered with all their contents to the Swiss Confederation, which will take them into account in the final settlement of expenses.
- Art. 8 The execution of the provisions of this agreement shall take place in the presence of the French and Swiss officers designated for this purpose.
- Art. 9 The Confederation reserves the right to designate the places of internment for officers and other ranks.
- Art. 10 The Federal Council shall indicate the detailed provisions intended to supplement the present Agreement.

Made in three copies at Les Verrières on 1 February 1871.

Clinchant

Hans Herzog

Throughout that day, all night and part of the following day, men, carriages, horses, artillery pieces, carriages and wagons streamed across the border in an endless procession.

“The entry of the French troops of the Army of the East offered a striking spectacle and one’s heart was profoundly moved by the sight of so much suffering”, wrote Major Davall in the official report on the French troops interned in Switzerland. He continued:

“Once they were no longer sustained by fear of the constant danger which had followed them for weeks [...] and as soon as they felt themselves on hospitable soil, where helping hands stretched out to them from all

sides, the soldiers collapsed completely and lost what little energy they had conserved.

A large proportion of them were marching barefoot or had wrapped their feet in rags. Their boots had been made of spongy, poorly tanned leather which could not withstand marches in snow and mud [...] and were generally too tight. Thus, the feet of many of these unfortunates were frozen or covered in blood. Their uniforms were in tatters and the soldiers, having appropriated whatever clothing they could find to replace missing items, were as motley a crew as you could ever imagine. Some of them were still in the canvas trousers they had received at the start of the campaign and were shivering pitifully.

As soon as the soldiers set foot on Swiss territory, they were disarmed and made to lay down their rifles, their sabres and their ammunition. Soon there were immense piles of weapons and effects on either side of the road.

The horses presented a particularly pathetic sight: starving, long neglected, often poorly harnessed, their hides sometimes no more than one revolting sore; thin, bony, barely able to stand, they gnawed at anything within reach — wheel rims, old sacks, the tail or main of the animal next to them. From time to time, one of these poor beasts, too exhausted to respond to the whip, would fall and expire where it lay. It would then be cut from its traces and dragged to the roadside already littered with the carcasses of other animals [...].

The drivers themselves admitted that many of the artillery horses had not been out of harness for weeks [...].

The procession began on the morning of 1 February and continued all day without interruption. First came a mixed crowd of soldiers, in no order of any kind and obeying no-one [...]. Later, some more organized units appeared: here one or two companies, there a battalion accompanied by its officers, and finally one or two complete regiments [...].

By a natural instinct of self-preservation, all these men kept close on the heels of those in front so that the march-past formed a solid column with no breaks or halts [...].

The slopes of the Jura were covered with snow, and at this season only three or four of the roads crossing into Switzerland were passable. What a strange spectacle this was to behold, with the long black lines of men winding through the countryside like a ceaseless torrent plunging down into the valley. The human flood, interspersed with thousands of

carriages, streamed on with no halt, no rest. Pushed on ceaselessly by the press from behind, crossing a sparsely populated land whose meagre resources could do little to meet such urgent needs, the soldiers made their way down into the valley until they came to a town or large village where they could at last find a moment's rest. The first troops to cross the border had to march until evening in order to leave the road open for other units to advance. When they finally arrived in inhabited areas where the population was waiting with relief supplies, these poor soldiers, hungry and exhausted, slid to the ground beside the houses and remained there squatting, inert, incapable of action and barely able to speak.

From one end of the columns to the other there came a constant chorus of strident coughing; almost all the men had chest infections and this constant hacking contributed to their prostration.”⁷

The French command had given a figure of 42,000 men. In fact, the numbers that entered Switzerland were: 87,847 men (including 2,467 officers), 11,800 horses, 285 cannon and mortars and 1,158 carriages.⁸

General officers were allowed to choose where they were to stay in Switzerland. The troops were split up and billeted in 188 towns and villages in all the Swiss cantons — except the Ticino — in numbers proportionate to the population.⁹

Some 5,000 men had to be evacuated to hospital immediately, but almost everyone needed medical care and all the places where the internees were accommodated — churches, schools, barracks, etc. — were turned into infirmaries.¹⁰

On 2 February, the Federal Council instructed the Swiss minister in Paris to start negotiations with the Government of National Defence and

⁷ Major E. Davall, *Les troupes françaises internées en Suisse à la fin de la guerre franco-allemande en 1871. Rapport rédigé par ordre du Département militaire fédéral sur les documents officiels déposés dans ses archives*, Bern, 1873, pp. 42-44.

⁸ É. Secretan, *op. cit.*, p. 553. When the campaign started at the end of December 1870, the Army of the East was estimated to number between 120,000 and 140,000 men.

⁹ E. Davall, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51, 61-62 and 83-87; É. Secretan, *op. cit.*, p. 575.

¹⁰ É. Secretan, *op. cit.*, p. 579. When the Army of the East departed from Besançon on 25 January, between 8,000 and 10,000 sick and wounded men were left behind in improvised hospitals and dressing stations (*ibid.*, p. 474). Major Davall (*op. cit.*, p. 290) noted that 17,897 internees were treated in makeshift hospitals and dressing stations. However, this number does not include all those who received treatment during the first days of the internment, when no records were kept because of the urgency of the needs to which medical staff had to attend.

with Bismarck with a view to the repatriation of the internees. However, while the French were in agreement, Ambassador Kern met with a flat refusal from Bismarck, who intended to use every available means to force the French government to sign a humiliating peace treaty as quickly as possible.¹¹

Thus it was not until the ratification of the peace preliminaries on 2 March 1871 that the Germans would consent to the repatriation of the internees. The repatriation itself took place on 13 and 14 March, with the bulk of the troops travelling by rail from Geneva and the remainder through Les Verrières and Divonne or by boat across Lake Geneva.¹²

About a thousand of the internees were still in hospital; they were repatriated in small groups after they had recovered. Some 1,700 internees died during their stay in Switzerland from the effects of typhus, smallpox or pulmonary disease.¹³

The costs arising from the internment amounted to 12 million francs. In accordance with the Agreement of Les Verrières, France reimbursed this sum in full in August 1872.¹⁴

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The war of 1870-1871 had exposed deep uncertainties with regard to the rules applicable to the conduct of hostilities, since, apart from the recently concluded Geneva Convention of 22 August 1864 for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field, the law of war still remained entirely customary. These uncertainties had given rise to serious differences between the belligerents, leading to reprisal measures.

Inspired by the example which the International Committee of the Red Cross had set in proposing the adoption, in time of peace, of a convention to govern the conduct of belligerents, Tsar Alexander II called a confer-

¹¹ *Documents diplomatiques suisses*, vol. 2, pp. 498-526; E. Davall, *op. cit.*, pp. 215-218; É. Secretan, *op. cit.*, pp. 576-578.

¹² E. Davall, *op. cit.*, p. 263; É. Secretan, *op. cit.*, pp. 578-579.

¹³ E. Davall, *op. cit.*, pp. 263 and 291-297; É. Secretan, *op. cit.*, p. 579.

¹⁴ E. Davall, *op. cit.*, pp. 304-311; É. Secretan, *op. cit.*, p. 579.

ence in Brussels from 27 July to 27 August 1874 to codify the laws and customs of war.

In the draft declaration which was to serve as the basis for the work of the Brussels Conference, the St Petersburg government had not envisaged any provision relating to internment in a neutral country. However, the retreat of Bourbaki's army was still too fresh in the memory for this question to be passed over. After all, never before in history had such a large army been interned in a neutral country and under such dramatic circumstances. Moreover, this internment had raised new legal problems relating to both the law of war and the law of neutrality; problems which had been resolved by Switzerland's negotiations with Germany on the one hand and with France on the other.¹⁵

The Conference, therefore, agreed without difficulty to consider the views of the Belgian delegate, who proposed that the matter be settled and submitted draft articles to this effect. Prolonged discussion led to the adoption of Articles 53 to 56 of the Brussels Declaration, which clearly bore the mark of the events at Les Verrières.¹⁶

As the Brussels Declaration was not subsequently ratified, the issue was taken up again at the First International Peace Conference, meeting in The Hague from 18 May to 29 July 1899. The articles which had been adopted in Brussels were incorporated almost word for word in the Convention Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land of 29 July 1899.¹⁷

Finally, having set itself the objective of codifying not only the law of war but also that of neutrality, the Second International Peace Conference, meeting in The Hague from 15 June to 18 October 1907, incorporated these provisions in the new Hague Convention Respecting the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land.¹⁸ The

¹⁵ Other divergences relating to the law of neutrality had appeared at the start of the war, when the Prussians asked for permission to use the Belgian and Luxembourg railways to evacuate men wounded at Metz and Sedan. *Conférence internationale de la Paix, La Haye, 18 mai-29 juillet 1899*, new ed., Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Hague, 1907, Part III, pp. 87-88.

¹⁶ Actes de la Conférence réunie à Bruxelles du 27 juillet au 27 août 1874 pour régler les lois et coutumes de la guerre, in Martens (ed.), *Nouveau Recueil général de Traités*, Second Series, vol. IV, pp. 26-27, 90, 162-168, 182-189, 195-197 and 225-226.

¹⁷ Articles 57 to 60 of the Regulations annexed to the Convention of 29 July 1899 with respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land, *Conférence internationale de la Paix, La Haye, 18 mai-29 juillet 1899*, Part I, pp. 30-31, 46-47, 54-55 and annexes, pp. 27-28; Part III, pp. 22, 37-38, 46-47, 85-88 and 146.

¹⁸ Hague Convention V of 18 October 1907.

Conference also determined two points on which the Brussels Conference had been unable to agree, namely, how to deal with escaped prisoners of war seeking refuge in a neutral country on the one hand, and with prisoners of war brought along by troops taking refuge in neutral territory on the other.¹⁹

Thus agreement was finally reached on Articles 11 to 15 of the Convention, which remains in force to this day. These articles form Chapter II, entitled "Belligerents Interned and Wounded Tended in Neutral Territory".

Article 11

A neutral Power which receives on its territory troops belonging to the belligerent armies shall intern them, as far as possible, at a distance from the theatre of war.

It may keep them in camps and even confine them in fortresses or in places set apart for this purpose.

It shall decide whether officers can be left at liberty on giving their parole not to leave the neutral territory without permission.

Article 12

In the absence of a special convention to the contrary, the neutral Power shall supply the interned with the food, clothing and relief required by humanity.

At the conclusion of the peace the expenses caused by the internment shall be made good.

Article 13

A neutral Power which receives escaped prisoners of war shall leave them at liberty. If it allows them to remain in its territory it may assign them a place of residence.

¹⁹ Second International Peace Conference, The Hague, 15 June-18 October 1907, *Actes et documents*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Hague, 1907, vol. I, pp. 125, 136-150, 345-346 and 640; vol. III, pp. 33-40, 51-62, 134, 179-185, 241, 246 and 257-267.

The same rule applies to prisoners of war brought by troops taking refuge in the territory of a neutral Power.

Article 14

A neutral Power may authorize the passage over its territory of the sick and wounded belonging to the belligerent armies, on condition that the trains bringing them shall carry neither personnel nor war material. In such case, the neutral Power is bound to take whatever measures of safety and control are necessary for the purpose.

The sick or wounded brought under these conditions into neutral territory by one of the belligerents, and belonging to the hostile party, must be guarded by the neutral Power so as to ensure their not taking part again in the military operations. The same duty shall devolve on the neutral State with regard to wounded or sick of the other army who may be committed to its care.

Article 15

The Geneva Convention applies to the sick and wounded interned in neutral territory.²⁰

These provisions, which pertain to both the law of war and the law of neutrality, have been applied on various occasions, notably during the two World Wars. The best-known case was that of the French 45th Army Corps, commanded by General Daille, which was encircled by the German armour of General Guderian just as the Army of the East had been by the Prussian infantry 70 years previously. Once again, the French were forced to seek refuge in Switzerland. On 18 June 1940, when Marshal Pétain had petitioned for an armistice and General de Gaulle launched his call for resistance from London, some 45,000 men, including 29,000 Frenchmen and Moroccans and 12,000 Poles who had

²⁰ Second International Peace Conference, The Hague, 15 June-18 October 1907, *Actes et documents*, vol. I, p. 640; *Handbook of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, 13th ed., International Committee of the Red Cross and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 1994, pp. 310-311.

enlisted in the French army, crossed the border a few kilometres to the north-east of Les Verrières. While the French and Moroccans were repatriated in January 1941 under an agreement between Germany and Vichy France, the Poles remained interned in Switzerland until the end of the hostilities.²¹

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“The entire generation of Swiss citizens who witnessed this grim epilogue to a cruel war has kept an undying memory of the tragedy. Never before, in this fortunate country, had such a disaster been seen”, wrote Colonel Édouard Secretan by way of conclusion to his history of the Army of the East.²²

Because the troops were scattered all over Switzerland, their pitiful state was plain to everyone and the public was profoundly moved. There was a tremendous surge of sympathy in the towns and villages through which the French soldiers had passed, and even more in the places where they were billeted while waiting to return to their homeland. During the first days of the internment this generosity was spontaneous, innumerable families unhesitatingly sharing with the troops the reserves of food and fodder they themselves needed to survive the winter. But the authorities and the Swiss Red Cross — founded four years previously — quickly mobilized to help the internees and provide them with the necessary food and medical care. Indeed, the reception of the “Bourbakis” was the first major aid operation conducted by the Swiss Red Cross.²³

²¹ Edgar Bonjour, *Histoire de la neutralité suisse*, translated by Charles Oser, La Baconnière, Neuchâtel, 1970, vol. VI, pp. 41-95; André Lasserre, *Frontières et camps. Le refuge en Suisse de 1933 à 1945*, Payot, Lausanne, 1995, pp. 150-158.

²² É. Secretan, *op. cit.*, p. 557.

²³ Unfortunately, as far as we know there is no general report covering all the activities of the Swiss Red Cross in connection with the arrival of the Army of the East. However, we do have the report of the Neuchâtel branch which, because of its geographical location, was the first to come to the assistance of the internees. This describes the arrangements which were made on an ad hoc basis during the initial passage of the troops and which became increasingly well-organized as the weeks went by: kitchens were set up to provide hot meals for soldiers passing through; the infirmaries were opened to tend the sick and wounded awaiting evacuation to hospital; both the sick and the able-bodied were accommodated in public buildings and private homes; food, clothing, fodder, firewood, etc. were distributed. Société suisse de Secours aux Militaires blessés, Neuchâtel branch, *Rapport général*, 1 July 1871, Imprimerie James Attinger, Neuchâtel, 1871.

The impression made by the arrival of the French soldiers was so deep that many who witnessed the event sought to immortalize it in print and on canvas.²⁴

In 1876, the entrepreneur Benjamin Henneberg decided to construct a panorama to depict the events at Les Verrières and commissioned the Geneva artist Édouard Castres to do the painting. In 1880, the “Société anonyme des Panoramas de Marseille, Lyon et Genève” undertook the construction of the building in Geneva. The rotunda was of an impressive size: 40 metres in diameter and 28 metres in height. The panorama which covered the inside wall was 14 metres high.²⁵

Édouard Castres was the obvious choice, not only because of his artistic talent but also because he had volunteered as a stretcher-bearer with the French Red Cross and had served in a mobile field hospital during the campaign of the Army of the East. On 1 February 1871 he had found himself at Les Verrières both as a participant in and as a witness to the tragedy that befell his companions in arms.²⁶ The vast circular panorama he created, covering 1,100 square metres, immortalized the ordeal of the French troops at the moment when they were crossing the Swiss frontier to be disarmed.

The panorama was inaugurated on 24 September 1881. “*The illusion is complete [...] and the whole effect is remarkable*”, wrote the *Journal de Genève* at the time.²⁷

²⁴ André Meyer and Heinz Horat, *Bourbaki. Episoden und Erlebnisse aus der Internierungszeit der Bourbaki-Armee 1871*, Edition Erpf, Bern, 1981.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16. The panorama was a mode of artistic expression which enjoyed a great vogue during the second half of the 19th century. It consisted of a circular building in the form of a rotunda, the inside wall of which was covered by a circular canvas depicting a landscape or some great historical event and designed to create an illusion of depth. The floor and ceiling were similarly decorated so that the visitor, entering the panorama by an underground passage and a spiral staircase giving access to an elevated platform in the centre of the rotunda, felt himself suddenly transported into the middle of the scene depicted. Many Western European cities had their own panoramas and the companies which operated them would circulate the canvases from one town to another. This mode of expression foreshadowed the cinema, the medium which eventually supplanted it. A few of the rotundas have survived and been converted into theatres, a good example being the “Rotonde des Champs-Élysées”. To the best of our knowledge, the only panorama which has remained continuously on show since its creation is that of Les Verrières in Lucerne. According to contemporary accounts, it was also the finest of them all.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53. Édouard Castres came to prominence in 1872 with the exhibition of his painting *L'ambulance dans la neige*. This work, one of the first depicting a Red Cross mobile field hospital, won a gold medal and critical acclaim.

²⁷ *Journal de Genève*, 28 September 1881.

The *Panorama des Verrières* remained on show in Geneva until 1889. It was then moved to Lucerne where it can still be seen.²⁸ We owe a debt of gratitude to the committee formed to preserve the panorama and also to the authorities of the city and canton of Lucerne who recently allocated funds for the restoration of this exceptional work. It is the last vestige of a form of artistic expression which flourished in the 19th century but has now long since disappeared and, at the same time, it is a moving testimony to the unspeakable suffering that every war leaves in its wake.

François Bugnion, Arts graduate and Doctor of Political Science is Deputy Director of the ICRC Department for Principles, Law and Relations with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. He is the author of *Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et la protection des victimes de la guerre*, ICRC, Geneva, 1994.

²⁸ Brigjt Kämpfen-Klapproth, *Das Bourbaki-Panorama von Édouard Castres*, 2nd ed., Éditions de la Ville de Lucerne, Lucerne, 1983, pp. 39-47.