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Book Review: Three Weeks in November: A Military History of the Swiss Civil War of 1847

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Weaver, Ralph, *Three Weeks in November: A Military History of the Swiss Civil War of 1847* (Helion and Company, Solihul, England, 2012), 86pp. 978-1908916570. \$49.55.

In 1847, Europe anticipated a wave of reformist revolution. That year, the Swiss fought a short, decisive and relatively humane war to determine the future of Switzerland. *Three Weeks in November* by Ralph Weaver, is a concise volume about this obscure but important revolution in European history. The events of the Swiss Civil War of 1847 are contained in fourteen brief chapters covering 64 pages. Mr. Weaver describes the events that led up to the civil war, the war itself, and the peace, including very brief biographies of the major leaders of both sides. The author also includes nine appendices, which cover various details such as army strengths, orders of battle, names and numbers of the units as well as a brief bibliography and index. The details contained within this volume make it very useful for a researcher of military history.

Weaver outlines the political, religious, economic, and even demographic points of contention leading up to the Swiss Civil War. He points out that the Swiss anticipated by almost a year the issues that would rip across Europe in 1848.

This volume is lavishly illustrated with contemporary and more recent prints of the war and its major personalities. There is also a very beautiful and useful twenty-three page section (not counted as part of the text) of color illustrations of uniforms, flags, maps, canton coats of arms and cockades.

The central issue, as outlined by the author, was whether a conservative aristocracy, preserving ancient, nearly feudal, privileges, would dominate Switzerland or give way to a united federal system that was more unified and democratic. Weaver also brings the religious element in play as a major issue. Although Switzerland is often associated with the works of Calvin, it is seldom noted that it also has a large Catholic minority. This minority was crucial to the question of organizing the new Swiss government. As a group, the Catholics tended to support the old order, the Sonderbund, as it would be known during the war.

Weaver brings out several factors that are unique to the Swiss Civil War. The war's brevity and the predatory nature of France, Aus-

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tria, and Prussia to divide the Confederation among themselves are dealt with. Even as the peace was being negotiated, France and Austria presented a proposal to the Swiss government that would have dismembered the nation. Had the war been protracted, Switzerland might well have vanished from the European map.

A second feature of the war was its humanity. Even before the outbreak of hostilities, General Dufour, the Confederate Commander, determined to keep casualties and property damage to a minimum. To that end he issued, and strictly enforced, orders against pillaging and needless destruction of property. Lack of recent combat experience helped to keep the number of casualties down. Weaver notes that the green troops tended to shoot high, and therefore deaths in battle tended to be the exception, rather than the rule.

A third interesting feature was the overall level of inexperience, not to be confused with incompetence, of both the officers and men. A dearth of wars had led to an officer corps out of practice. Even those officers who had been to war, most of the senior commanders who had served under the French during the Napoleonic Wars, were out of practice. All Swiss males were technically in the army for most of their lives. The author does an excellent job explaining the canton and national military system but because of the autonomy of the various cantons, training was uneven. According to Weaver, the system worked well enough to provide sufficient troops, but they were, for the most part, poorly trained, which accounts for the remarkably low casualty count.

Despite the lack of training, both the Swiss Confederation officer corps and army responded well to the leadership of General Dufour who, in the manner of Marlborough, maneuvered his army into battles where the enemy was usually faced with little option but to retreat or surrender. Dufour is portrayed as a humane military genius whose strategy was to isolate the various Sonderbund cantons and then intimidate them into surrendering rather than fighting. He offered generous terms and good treatment, which led the Sonderbund rebels to reconsider their stance. Weaver related only one instance of pillage in his book and although there may have been more, the fact remains that rather than risk wholesale destruction, most Sonderbund canton governments surrendered when given the option.

The last brief chapter describes the peace in sparse detail. After the battle of Wallis/Valais, the remaining Sonderbund cantons surrendered. By the end of November 1847, the Swiss Civil War was over. Peace was restored. The Sonderbund armies were demobilized along with the Confederation armies, except for occupying forces. A very small number of high-level Sonderbund members were punished, some went into exile, but most were reintegrated into Swiss society. The war, though short, was decisive. Victory of the Swiss federal diet paved the way for the Switzerland of today.

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