

"Roulez tambours..."

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1957)**

Heft 1301

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-691073>

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“ROULEZ TAMBOURS. . .”

An Anniversary.

Who amongst our compatriots does not know that fiery and inspiring song of our French-speaking compatriots which has long ago become the common property of our country? This patriotic song is celebrating its 100th birthday, and it is well worth remembering, when, and under what circumstances, this martial tune first saw the light of day.

“Roulez Tambours” originated during the Neuchâtel dispute of 1856 to 1857, which created a great stir not only in Switzerland but throughout Europe. In contrast to the other 21 cantons which constituted the Swiss Confederation, and which were without exception of a purely republic character, the canton of Neuchâtel, which entered the Confederation in 1815, was still a principality under foreign jurisdiction. The King of Prussia was in fact called amongst his other titles Prince of Neuchâtel and Count of Vallangin. When over a hundred years ago the regeneration movement swept away all reactionary governments in most of the cantons the republicans in the canton of Neuchâtel revolted against its rulers, but the revolution was put down by force. The small but active republican party did not lose heart; the discontent with the representatives of the royal dynasty grew rapidly and many adherents were won over in various parts of the Jura.

During the great and far-reaching political events of 1847 and 1848 a new and vigorous revolution broke out, and the Government was promptly chased over the boundary. A new constitution was proclaimed, which was more in keeping with the one of the Swiss Confederation. Prussia, which at the time had its own troubles, seemed to take but little notice of the happenings, treating the matter very contemptuously; but nine years after this event the royalist party, under the leadership of Colonel de Pourtalès, tried to reinstate the old régime. In the night of 2nd to 3rd September his troops stormed the castle and took possession of the town of Neuchâtel. The republican Government was arrested and put under lock and key; but already the following day the republican forces, under the command of Colonel Denzler, recaptured the castle. Eight royalists were killed, 26 wounded and 480 made prisoners. The King of Prussia at once demanded that all prisoners should be set free, and made other demands, asserting his rights over the principality of Neuchâtel. His demands were couched in such language that no self-respecting country could enter even into preliminary negotiations and war seemed to be inevitable.

On 2nd January the Prussian army received marching orders, the South German States having granted free passage to the King's forces. A wave of war enthusiasm swept over the whole of Switzerland; the entire population stood like one man behind the Federal Council, volunteers flocked to the colours from all parts of the country. On 30th December Parliament unanimously elected General Dufour commander-in-chief of the Federal forces. He assembled at once an army of 30,000 men and threw them on the threatened frontier. Extensive fortifications were erected, all the Rhein bridges were fortified, Schaffhausen and Eglisau were transformed into

fortresses, and the steamers on the Lake of Constance were armed with guns. The entourage of Klein Basel was fortified and manned with heavy artillery, 78 pieces in all.

General Dufour's plan was to be on the defence at Basle, whilst his forces were to attack the Prussians at Schaffhausen. It was in these days of national enthusiasm that Amiel's song:

“Roulez tambours, pour couvrir la frontière,

Aux bords du Rhin, guidez nous au combat”
was first sung by our French speaking compatriots.

Diplomatic relations between Prussia and the Confederation were broken off when some of the other powers, especially Great Britain, made it known that they disapproved of a settlement by armed force. France intimated that should Prussia cross the frontier they would at once occupy the cantons of Neuchâtel and Geneva, and Austria would do the same with the cantons of Ticino and Grisons. In order to avert these dangers negotiations were started after Switzerland had agreed to release the royalist prisoners on condition that they left the country until the dispute was settled. On 5th March 1857 the plenipotentiaries of France, Austria, Great Britain and Russia assembled in Paris and agreed on terms which were put before the two belligerents. The Swiss Parliament accepted these terms on the 11th and 12th June, and the King of Prussia made his acceptance of the conditions known on the 19th of the same month. The latter, however, only agreed to the terms after Napoleon and the Government of Great Britain had put some considerable pressure on him. Switzerland had every reason to be satisfied with the settlement. The King of Prussia renounced all rights over the Principality of Neuchâtel and the canton of Neuchâtel was declared an independent canton of the Swiss Confederation. Switzerland had to bear the cost of the September events and agreed not to prosecute any of the participants who had taken part in the rising. The only souvenir Switzerland inherited from this “bloodless” war was that striking song: “Roulez tambours. . .”

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