1856-2006: The "Swiss Military Review" is 150 years old!

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(version française, p. 200)

It was on May the 10th 1856 that the first issue of the Revue Militaire Suisse appeared, on the initiative of Captain Ferdinand Lecomte, a militia officer and editor until 1895. Until then, only one military periodical existed in Switzerland, the Schweizerische Militärzeitung, founded in Basel by Major Wieland, which today, carries the title of Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitschrift (ASMZ). The Revue Militaire Suisse (RMS) reproduces the most interesting articles of the Schweizerische Militärzeitschrift in the French language. It includes articles created by French speaking officers, and is used as a means of communication between officers in the Swiss Romande. It goes far beyond the objectives set out back in 1856.

In the four languages Swiss Federation wishing to maintain a militia army, the military press doesn't have the same content, style or impact as in a centralized State such as France. Beyond the Jura, the high command and the Defence minister exercise a certain control over articles published in periodicals that appear as an official mouthpiece of which they finance a great portion. In Switzerland, the military press belongs to private associations, which do not receive any funding from the authorities. While remaining obliged to maintain loyalty and not to disclose military secrets, editors and publishers have no one to account to; and texts they publish mustn’t receive any prior censorship.

1. Life and History

The period of Ferdinand Lecomte

Initially appearing twice monthly on sixteen pages, the RMS closely followed military actualities. Ferdinand Lecomte is a man of action who doesn’t hesitate to show up on various battlefields abroad. In the review he published several works in the form of supplements, notably “Italy in 1960” (Volumes 1860 and 1861) “The American War” (volumes 1862 and 1863), “the Danish war in 1864” (volumes 1864 and 1865). Since 1865, these supplements, appearing once a month are principally devoted to a “Review of special arms”.

The RMS describes abundantly the Franco-German war of 1870-71, the serious gaps in Swiss military organisation, that leads to a shake-up of the institutions, for which the legal basis will be the new constitution of 1874. It published the highly critical report of general Herzog, commander in chief in 1870-71, concerning the implementation in July and August 1870: it doesn’t rock the reader’s illusions! His first requirement of the state is to “not leave its army lacking what it needs in order to be combat ready (...)”

47. RMS, 1871, p. 55.
Since January 1882 the RMS became a monthly publication, “wishes to remain neutral to all parties or cliques, as with all material benefits (...) It opens its columns to all opinions, as long as they are expressed in a reasonable language (...)”48. In 2006, the press specifies that the RMS “is an official publication organ of the society of Swiss officers. It belongs to the cantonale sectors of Romande and Bern. It is edited by the Association of the Swiss military review. The goal of the RMS is, notably, to facilitate exchanges on military problems and to develop the knowledge and general culture of officers. Published texts only express the opinion of their authors. The RMS is open to all persons anxious to work constructively for the general well-being of defence”.

The 1874 constitution confides the control of all the army to the Federal Government, the cantons loose the responsibility of equipping the men, along with the right to have certain troops at their disposition. Until this time, there were twenty-two “cantonal armies” in Switzerland. The sovereign people, who are called to the ballot box on numerous defence issues, from reorganisation or reform of the federal army, worry about expenditure and new military obligations. The federalist RMS exposes on numerous occasions projects about centralisation of the federal army, and in fact criticises it. On the eve of a popular vote on the 3rd November 1895 about the abolition of the cantonal right to nominate promotion of officers to the rank of commander of a battalion in the infantry and replacing the military directives of the cantons by federal military districts, one can read: “The Cantonal authorities are obviously better placed than a distant power to make nominations on good grounds (...). Already today, in nominations and promotions concerning the Federal Council (...) don’t we frequently see this high authority use an unfortunate arm, through lack of accurate intelligence concerning the electorate?49.” The rejection of a project, judged too centralised is not surprising.

**Increased tension in Europe and the First World War**

At the time when one sees an increase in the military power of the greater European powers, the Swiss authorities proceed with partial and gradual changes. In 1907, the RMS supports the new military organisational law, which will go before the people: “The task for all is to work towards the acceptance of the law. That we delve into the consequences that its rejection would have (...). This would be the adjournment of a quarter century of reform. And if, during this period, the events of war came to surprise us (...)?50.” The project is accepted with a small majority...

During the years preceding the First World War, the RMS informs its readers precisely. All armies have their place. It pleads for the création of a military aviation... A certain worry is born, due to the events occurring around Switzerland. Foreign chronicles, despite the imminence of conflict, remain rich with intelligence. Thus, the “German chronicle” of June 1914 offers details on the imperial armed forces.

When he quit his job as chief editor in 1896, Ferdinand Lecomte had consecrated thirty-nine years to the RMS and he was profoundly missed, being beneficiary of his impartial analysis of events which he himself had experienced or on subjects upon which he was sufficiently well informed to offer accurate accounts. Taken over by Fernand Feyler, the RMS is still ready to fulfil, on the eve of the outbreak of the First

48. RMS, December 1881.
50. RMS, 1907, p. 307.