

## Basel and the Franco-Prussian War

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP  
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),  
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and 1871 brought war to the gates of Basel and changed the political map of its region. In the summer and autumn of 1870, German armies besieged Strasbourg, whose population suffered heavy bombardment. A Swiss delegation, organised by citizens of Basel, Zurich and Bern, obtained permission from the besiegers to evacuate civilians from the city. In September 1870, several thousand inhabitants of Strasbourg were brought out of the besieged city and received in Basel and other Swiss towns.<sup>1</sup> The episode, which took place a few years after the foundation of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva in 1863, was an early example of Swiss humanitarian intervention in a European war.

In February 1871, the defeated French army of General Bourbaki, more than eighty thousand men, crossed the Swiss border in the Jura and was interned in Switzerland, where it was disarmed, fed and cared for until the end of the war. The cost of the internment was later reimbursed by France.<sup>2</sup> The internment of the Bourbaki army became a founding moment of Swiss humanitarian neutrality and is commemorated in the panorama painting preserved in Lucerne.

The peace of Frankfurt of 1871 transferred Alsace and part of Lorraine to the new German Empire. For Basel, this meant that its western neighbour, Alsace, with which it had close economic and family ties, became German. When the border between Switzerland and France moved west to the Jura, the city found itself surrounded on two sides by Germany. The German administration of Alsace from 1871 to 1918 integrated the region into the German economy and customs system, which affected the trade of Basel with its Alsatian hinterland. After the First World War, Alsace returned to France, giving the trinational configuration of the Basel region its present form.

## 1 Notes

1. On the Swiss humanitarian intervention during the siege of Strasbourg in September 1870 and the evacuation of civilians to Basel and other Swiss towns, see HLS, article "Deutsch-Französischer Krieg"; the literature on Swiss humanitarian action in 1870/71. Figures to be verified. ↩
2. On the internment of the French Army of the East under General Bourbaki in Switzerland in February 1871 (about 87,000 men) and the reimbursement of costs by France, see HLS, article "Bourbaki-Armee". Figures to be verified. ↩

---

*For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.*

Online version: [helveticaregister.com/basel-basel-and-the-franco-prussian-war](https://helveticaregister.com/basel-basel-and-the-franco-prussian-war)