

## VIII

# The Winter Campaign in France

(1870-71)

*“The Legion has just done by itself the labour of an entire division.”*

*General Peytavin. Army of the East, 1870.*

Called to the soil of France in October 1870, the Legion, accustomed to victory in the Crimea, Italy and Mexico, ended up sharing the ordeal that two years of a disastrous campaign brought us.

Fighting under our flag, the foreigners would receive a baptism of fire, zeal in their hearts, accepting with courage the difficult withdrawal of the Army of the Loire and then that of the Army of the East.

The role of the Legion in 1870-71, in the course of those last months of that called the Terrible Year, is little known. And yet! To the two ad-hoc battalions formed in Algeria and arriving in Bourges on the 13th of October 1870 was added a third, carrying the designation of the 5th battalion of the Legion, a battalion which had just covered itself in glory.

Already, at the end of July 1870, as would repeat itself in August 1914, a crowd of foreigners had “asked to serve under the flag of France”, which was the origin of the decree signed by the Empress Eugénie creating, on the 22nd of August, this 5th battalion of the Foreign Regiment.

Austrians, Swiss, Belgians, Rumanians, Spanish, Italians and Poles formed its eight companies. Amongst them were five officers with foreign titles, one of whom was the Serbian prince Karageorgevitch, the future king Pierre 1st. He, under the name of Kara (Georges) had been a pupil at the school of Saint-Cyr between 1862 and 1864 and had left as a 2nd lieutenant.

Commanded by major Arago who, illustrating the name he bore, found death in this battle, the 5th battalion of the Legion distinguished itself on the 10th October before Orleans. Armed partly with Chassepots and partly with percussion rifles, the legionnaires produced “miracles of of adroitness and audacity” during the defence of Bel-Air-les-Aides and the struggle which followed in the Bannier district. In the night the surrounded elements of the battalion refused to surrender and “Bavarians and Prussians shook hands across their bodies.”

During the combat in front of Orleans the 5th battalion of the Foreign Regiment lost two thirds of its effectives. With Major Arago, five officers had been killed: Captain Charnaux, 2nd lieutenants Kaczkowski, Fay, Yung de Cristofeu and Kurnevitch. Six others were able to cross the enemy lines; 2nd lieutenant Kara was amongst them, the prince having disguised himself as a miller.

Is this not a fine page, partially unknown, for the annals of the Foreign Legion?

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On the 9th of November the Foreign Regiment took part in the victory at Coulmiers and the retaking of Orleans. The Prussian captain Milson de Botte, staff officer for prince Frederic-Charles, who had been on the expedition to Mexico in the ranks of the Legion, “boasted of the solidarity of his old corps”, imperturbable under artillery fire. But, its success was short-lived.

Once more a retreat, beneath the snow, the depressing retreat with, from time to time, shocks such as the bayonet charge at Cercottes-Chevilly on the 4th of December. The regiment was then sent to the Army of the East, where it distinguished itself again on the 14th of January in the freezing cold. "The Legion," said general Peytavin "has just done by itself the labour of an entire division." Finally, with its companion in misery the 39th line regiment, in front of Besançon, the Foreign Regiment learned the conclusion of the peace.

It was likewise with the 39th that the Regiment was engaged in Paris in the struggle against the Commune; this is not the work of legionnaires and we will pass in silence over this sad episode after which, in June 1871, the Legion returned to Algeria.