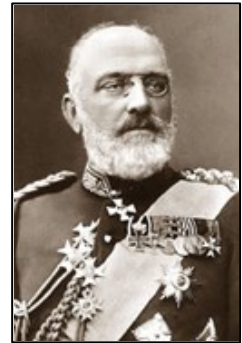


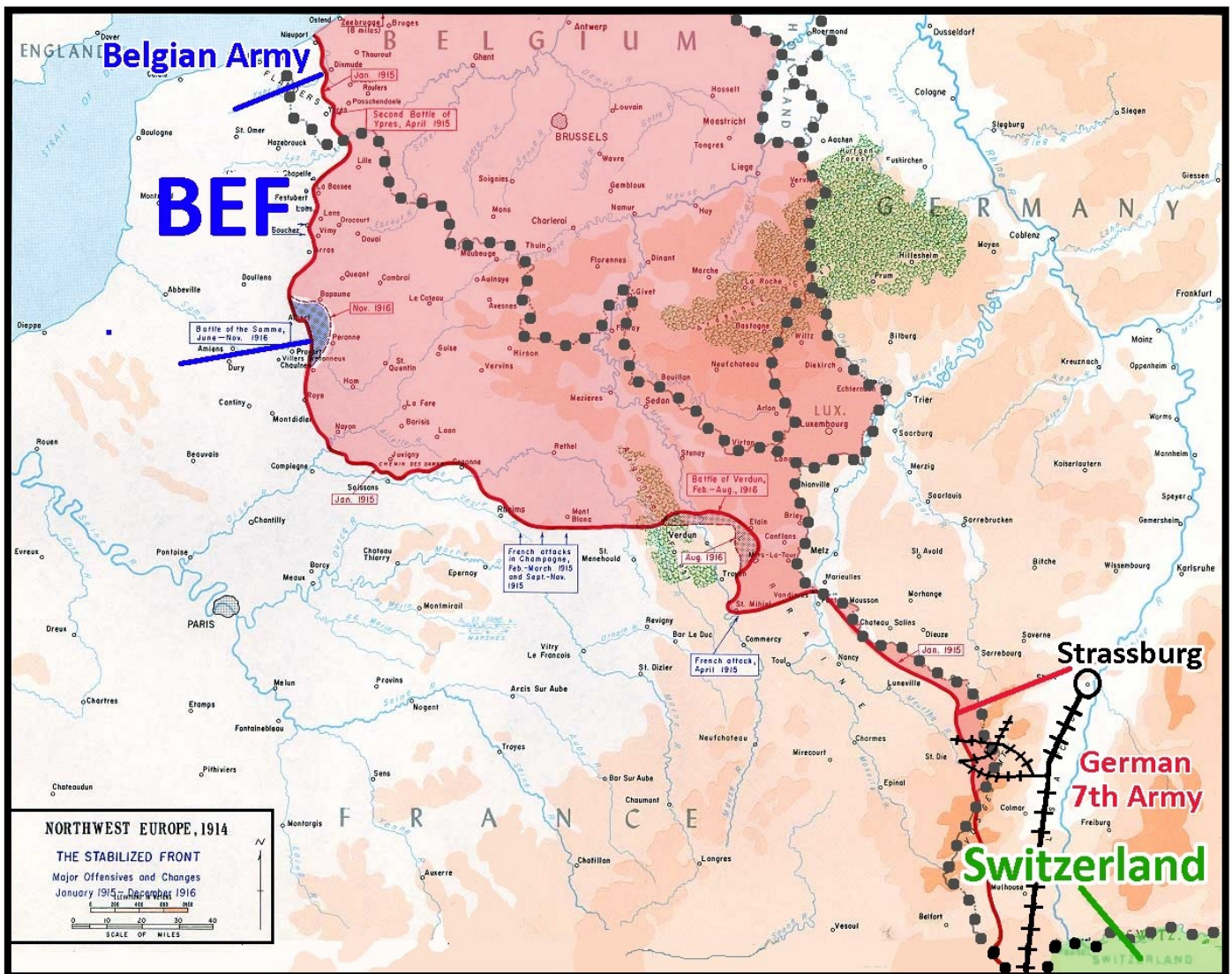
# The Western Front Near Switzerland

The Western Front stabilized in November 1914, after the German First Army and the BEF had raced towards the English Channel attempting to turn each other's northern flank. The Western Front's southern sector, the area from the village of Moussey (southwest of Saarebourg) to the Swiss border, was that front's quiet sector. On the German side, it was held by the 7<sup>th</sup> Army commanded by General Josias Oskar von Heeringen of a wealthy Kassel family that was close to the last Elector of Hesse. The 7<sup>th</sup> Army's lines-of-communication ran through the western bank area of the Rhine River south of Strassburg, the historic French province of Alsace. Throughout the war, the only military activity by the 7<sup>th</sup> Army was the constant rotation of its units with those in active sectors of the front.

Von Heeringen



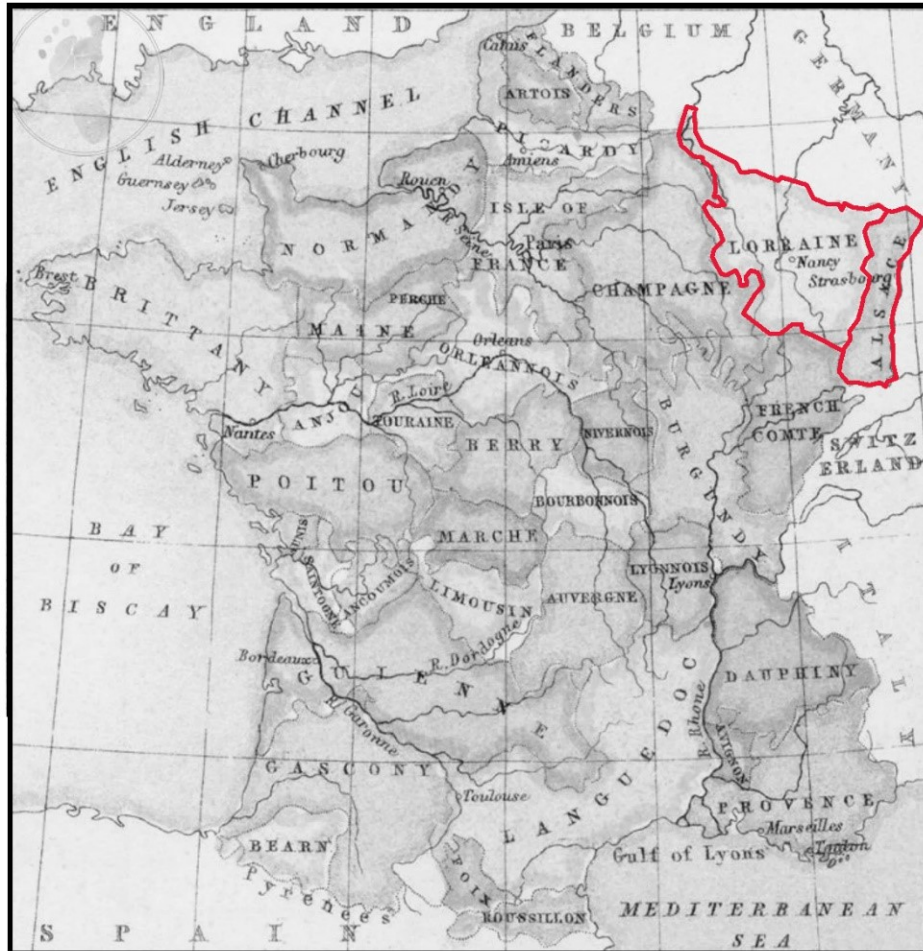
## Western Front, December 1914 with 1916 Changes



 German occupied territory.

That GHQ France's operatives in Switzerland obtained little information about the German 7<sup>th</sup> Army is not surprising. Though the Rhine's west bank area, Alsace, was inhabited mostly by ethnic French they were largely apathetic to the war and in any event, unable to assist the Entente due to the long-standing, German police and security presence there. The Rhine's east bank area was historically German soil and would have almost no residents willing to spy against Germany. Even if the British had an effective agent network in the Upper Rhine region, it would have almost nothing to report as nothing of military interest occurred there.

### Provinces of Pre-Revolutionary France, 1796



It was not feasible for the Germany army to launch a major offensive against the French south of Strassburg. First, the only rail lines that crossed the Franco-German border there were two single-track lines which were inadequate to service a large invading force. There was a double-track railway line that ran from Strassburg south to the French fortress city of Belfort; however, before it entered France it ran through Switzerland. Second, a German attack through Alsace would be an advance to nowhere. The terrain there was rough and could be defended easily by the French and it is 375 kilometers from Colmar, Alsace to Paris.

The French too would not attack in the Alsace area. As noted above, the railway network there was inadequate. Furthermore, there was nothing of military value in the German upper Rhine region. Finally, if the French did attack in strength, the Germans could withdraw to the Rhine's east bank where they would have a nearly impregnable, defensive position (wooded heights overlooking a river valley).

Because there was no opportunity for military action in Alsace, the German 7<sup>th</sup> Army, from 1914 through 1916, consisted only of eight infantry divisions. That was 7% of the 109 German infantry divisions then on the Western Front.

Sources: Vincent J. Esposito, *West Point Atlas of American Wars* (New York: Praeger, 1959); Clason's War Map of the Western Front (1918); *Black's General Atlas of the World* (Edinburgh: 1867); Volker Prott, "Challenging the German Empire: Strategic nationalism in Alsace-Alsace in the First World War," *Nations and Nationalism* 2, No. 4 (2021): 1009-25; Etienne Auphan, "L'apogee des chemins de fer secondaire en France," *Revue d'Histoire des Chemins de Fer* 24-25 (2002): 24-46; John Ellis & Michael Cox, *The World War I Data Book* (London: Aurum, 1993); Nigel Thomas, *The German Army in World War I*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Osprey, 2003).