



# Campaign of the Army of the North 1870-71

*Louis Faidherbe*

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## **Campaign of the Army of the North 1870-71** Louis Faidherbe

The author of this work, Louis (Léon-César) Faidherbe was recalled to France, from Africa, after the disaster of Sedan, and on 18 November 1870 given command of the so-called Army of the North. As a native of the region and a staunch republican, Faidherbe was a natural choice as commander, despite his lack of combat experience. Moreover, he was a modest man, almost painfully honest and well aware that the raw material with which he had to fashion his army was most inadequate. Nonetheless, by the end of 1870 Faidherbe had made fairly good progress, although not to the extent he wished when government pressure to link up with the army in Paris increased by the end of November. However, he dutifully moved south and engineered a striking success by capturing the fortress of Ham, thereby cutting German rail communications to the west and threatening their rear areas. The German reaction was belated, but on 23 December Faidherbe was able to fight a partly successful delaying action east of Amiens. However, he realized his troops were fast deteriorating in the wintry weather and that German reinforcements were coming in, and so he withdrew north to Arras.

His next task was set as the relief of the important fortress of Péronne, then besieged by the Germans, and in a series of closely contested fights around Bapaume on 3 January 1871 the French made some progress. However, Faidherbe did not feel his troops up to further effort and withdrew northwest; perhaps not the best decision under the circumstances, for the Germans too were weak and were preparing to lift the siege of Péronne, but it was a consistent one for Faidherbe. In fact, Péronne capitulated on the 9th. Once more the government stressed to him the necessity of doing something to divert the German efforts at Paris, and Faidherbe determined on a move southeast to cut across German communications. The movement was unfortunately not the easiest, and it was made more difficult in that the French army was marching across the front of the German forces, who could readily observe and harass it. Moreover, the terrible winter weather and the poor condition of Faidherbe's troops complicated the maneuver, and by the time Faidherbe's army arrived around Saint-Quentin the Germans had anticipated it. All that the French could do on 19 January was to fight another defensive battle in and around the town against attacks from the south and west. Faidherbe's men fought well in parts, but their morale was low, and in spite of their numerical superiority they were forced into a disorderly retreat, shedding refugees with every mile, until once more they were under the shelter of the fortresses. There they remained until the war ended.

This is a translation of Faidherbe's slim volume entitled *Campagne de l'Armée du Nord* published in 1872. It sets out in some detail the operations of the Army of the North and includes many appendices which give supporting evidence and documents. Certain of Faidherbe's opinions were not shared by his principal later German opponent, General August von Goeben, and Goeben, himself a writer and thinker of some stature, replied in a volume that year to refute Faidherbe's claims. Faidherbe riposted with *Army of the North: a response to General Goeben* in 1873, and the controversy continued until Goeben died in 1880. The work translated here is the 1872 volume. It has been reproduced in its entirety, and the presentation of the original has largely been followed. An appendix with a detailed order of battle for the Army of the North about the middle of January 1871 has been added.

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