SOUFFLENHEIM, A BRIEF HISTORY

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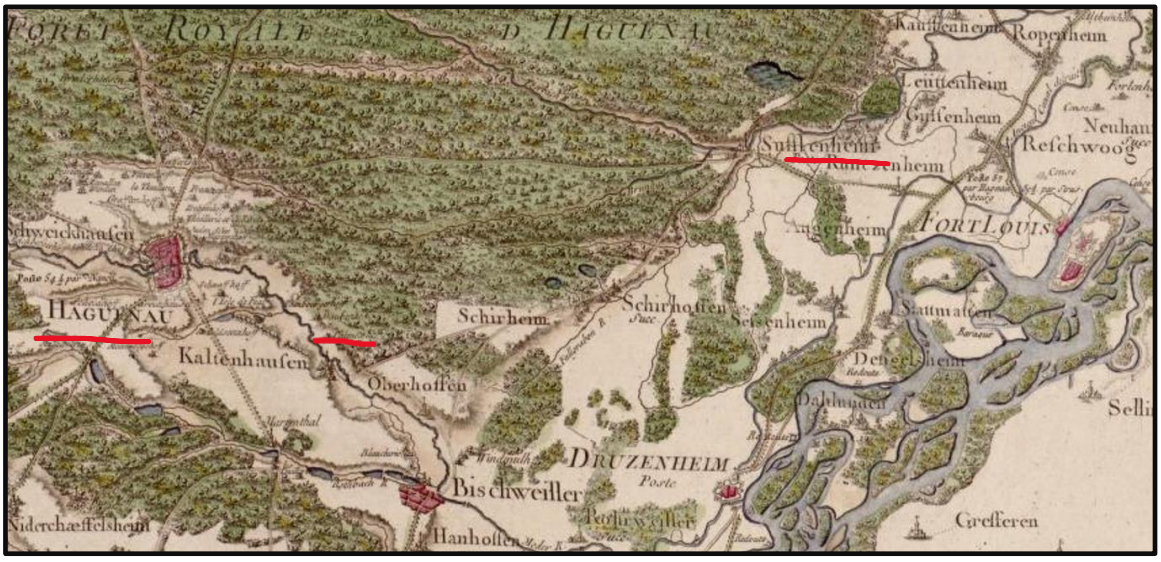
Soufflenheim is located in the historical and cultural region of Bas-Rhin, Alsace. The city of Strasbourg is 37 kilometers south of Soufflenheim, Lauterbourg and the German border are 25 kilometers north of the town, and the city of Haguenau is 14 kilometers west of Soufflenheim. The Rhine River is about 10 kilometers to the east.

Soufflenheim's village cluster is sandwiched between the Haguenau Forest and the North Ried (also known as the Petit Ried). The Ried spreads over a narrow strip along the Rhine River and was formed by the river's once meandering behavior. The Ried is an alluvial wetland consisting of marshes and meadows that were prone to flooding in any given year. Soufflenheim's village cluster is on a terrace above the Ried, a location that protected the residential cluster from flooding on the Rhine plain. The town's agricultural fields are located to the south and east of the village and are primarily in the Ried.



Cassini map showing Soufflenheim and Haguenau, 1767
Source: https://www.loc.gov/resource/g5830m.ghl00001/?sp=167&r=0.55,0.114,0.332,0.118,0

To the west and north of Soufflenheim is the thick Haguenau Forest, the largest undivided forest in France. These woodlands are on the terrace above the Ried. Two rivers cross the village: the Fallgraben and the Eberbach, both of which drain the Haguenau Forest. The residents of Soufflenheim have used the forest for many centuries to collect dead wood, to glean acorns, and to graze their pigs. The forest is also a source of clay used by the potters of Soufflenheim.

The Origins of Soufflenheim

Archaeological surveys have found evidence of settlement at Soufflenheim dating from the eighth century. The town first appeared in history during the High Middle Age. In 1147, an official Papal letter by Pope Eugene III granted an estate ("grangia") to the Cistercian Abbey of Neubourg. That land is now Soufflenheim.

The Cistercian order was founded in 1098 at the monastery of Citeaux in Burgundy. It emphasized simplicity and manual labor for its monks, and it is considered by many historians as an important medieval reform of Benedictine monasticism. The Cistercian order grew rapidly under Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, and it had established hundreds of monastery houses by the time of his death in 1153.

One of these houses, the Abbey of Neubourg, was founded in 1133 at Dauendorf, a small village east of Haguenau. These monks came into possession of land at Harthouse (a hamlet in Haguenau), Laubach, and at Soufflenheim. It was this land that Pope Eugene III granted in 1147.

The Cistercian monks encouraged the development of farms, barns, stables, fields, meadows, and pastures at their Soufflenheim estate. The three-field system was introduced, and a crop rotation was practiced among the fields. Agricultural development by the Abbey attracted immigrants from Baden and Swabia. These new-commers settled at the estate, and leased land from the Abbey. The settlers built houses, barns, and hay sheds on the terrace above the Ried. These structures became the village of Soufflenheim.

In 1334, the town of Soufflenheim was sold to the imperial city of Haguenau and became an imperial village. As such it fell under the Bailiwick of Haguenau and was a dependent of the Schultheiss (or provost) at Haguenau. The city of Haguenau thus held the seigneurial rights to Soufflenheim. These were, first, the right to use and enjoy the properties, and second, the right to give orders and prohibitions. The residents at Soufflenheim were thereby subject to the orders of the city Schultheiss and were required to serve him in the same way as the city's burghers served the Schultheiss.

The Thirty Years' War

At the end of the sixteenth century, the historical evidence suggests that the material situation of Soufflenheim's residents was good. That situation, however, ended as the seventeenth century unfolded. The prosperity that marked the end of the sixteenth century was broken by the devastation of war.

The Thirty Years' War broke out in 1618. In November 1621, Lutheran troops under the leadership of Ernest von Mansfeld invaded northern Alsace. They captured Lauterbourg and occupied Haguenau in December 1621.

In 1622, Soufflenheim was looted and burned by von Mansfeld's troops. The town hall fell prey to the flames, and all the documents held in the building were destroyed. This is why little is known about the early history of Soufflenheim. The looting by von Mansfeld's troops ruined the village and it was impossible for the villagers to generate income (in money or in kind) to pay their taxes.

Ten years later, in 1632, Swedish troops under the leadership of Gustaf Horn invaded Alsace. Armies of the Holy Roman Emperor and the King of France confronted the Swedes and Alsace became a theater of war for years to follow. Again, villages were looted and burned, as the Swedish army ravaged the entire province. The war caused famine, plague, and suffering. The years 1635 to 1639 were particularly deadly and Soufflenheim's population was decimated.

Repopulation and Rebuilding

The Treaties of Westphalia signed in 1648 finally ended the Thirty Years' War. Among other things, the treaties awarded most of Alsace to the Kingdom of France. The status of Haguenau (an imperial city) and its dependencies remained ambiguous until 1679 when, under the Treaties of Nijmegen, the ten imperial cities of Alsace were annexed to France and the French King became the undisputed sovereign over Haguenau and Soufflenheim.

The long war had ravaged and depopulated most of Bas-Rhin. More than a third of the population had disappeared and the new French administration faced an enormous rebuilding task. To help repopulate Alsace, Louis XIV recruited foreigners. He encouraged immigration by granting settlers land to clear, timber for construction, and tax exemptions for up to six years. Settlers from Switzerland, Baden, Swabia, and Bavaria came to Soufflenheim as well as other Alsatian towns and villages.

The Battle of the Pandours was commemorated in 1760 with a copperplate engraving titled:
"Retranchemens de Suffelsheim, forces le 23. aoust 1744 le Prince Charles oblige de repasser le Rhin"
Source: https://pictures.abebooks.com/inventory/31504730076.jpg

The rebuilding process was, however, strained by the new wars of King Louis XIV (r. 1643-1715). The Franco-Dutch War (1672-1678), the War of the Grand Alliance (1689-1697), and the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714) generated additional economic burdens on Soufflenheim. During these wars, the village was required to provide money and military supplies for the King's armies, depleting any surpluses that could be used for local rebuilding.

A generation later, during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748), the village was again taxed and required to provide military supplies. Soufflenheim also became a battlefield of that war. In early June 1744 Prince Charles of Lorraine led an Austrian army of 60,000 troops into northern Alsace. Haguenau was captured, Saverne was attacked, and the fortress at Fort Louis was besieged.

French troops led by Maréchal de Noailles mounted a counter offensive. The French army entered Alsace through the Saverne Pass on 13 August, and on 23 August 1744 engaged the Austrian army at their Soufflenheim encampment near the road to Schirrhein. In what is known as the Battle of the Pandours, the Austrian army was dislodged from the encampment and lost 2,000 troops in the battle. Later that day, in a second engagement, this time east of the town, the Austrians lost another 1,200 troops. The invading army was thereby forced back across the Rhine.

Throughout the eighteenth century, Soufflenheim remained an agricultural community. The three-field system established by the Cistercian monks continued to shape the agricultural land, but modifications were also introduced. In addition to grain and hay, the agricultural fields at Soufflenheim produced root crops and legumes. Legumes were notable for their nitrogen-fixing root nodules. They collect available nitrogen from the atmosphere and store it in these nodules. When the plant was harvested, the uncollected roots break down, making the stored nitrogen available to future crops. For this reason, legumes played an important role in crop rotations.

Other crops found in eighteenth century Soufflenheim included beets and potatoes. The potato was a New World product that was brought to Europe in the sixteenth century. By the end of the sixteenth century it had been introduced into the Franche-Comté, the Vosges of Lorraine, and Alsace. A century later, it was widely cultivated across southwestern Germany and eastern France.

Potatoes had a significant effect on European demographics. The product yielded about three times the calories of grain from the same amount of land and was more nutritious. Moreover, potatoes grew in a wide variety of soils and climates. These factors significantly improved agricultural production in the Early Modern era. For the local populations, potatoes were cheaper than bread, just as nutritious, and did not require a special mill for grinding.

Potters of Soufflenheim

Today, Soufflenheim is famous for its pottery. Craftsmen have been manufacturing pottery at Soufflenheim since the earliest days of the town. The first historical record to mention the existence of a community of potters in Soufflenheim was in 1442. However, well before that date Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (r. 1155-1190) had granted Soufflenheim residents the perpetual right to dig clay free of charge in the Haguenau Forest, suggesting pottery was being manufactured in the twelfth century. The emperor also gave the Soufflenheim residents usage of felled trees and wood that was not used for construction purposes. Access to the clay and wood from the nearby forest favored the development of pottery making at Soufflenheim.

The potter's wheel was the main tool of the craft. Propelled by a foot pedal, shapes were formed on the wheel by the craftsman molding the clay. The clay objects were then air-dried, painted, and fired in a kiln.

Archaeological evidence found in the central part of Soufflenheim includes clay bowls, plates, and pitchers that were manufactured at the town. These items were similar to items still manufactured today by Soufflenheim potters. The Soufflenheim municipal accounts record the town's purchase of cups and pots in 1684 and again in 1685, while archaeologists have found a vase bearing the date 1402.

Another important product made in Soufflenheim was the earthenware stove (*poële*). These objects have been used for heating indoor spaces in the Germanic regions of Europe since the Early Middle Ages. Ceramic tiles were fastened to the traditional Alsatian stove. The tiles increased the radiation of the heat and decorated the stove. The heat efficiency of the device was better than that of an open-fire hearth, and thus the earthenware stove reduced fuel consumption.

The Soufflenheim municipal accounts suggest that the manufacture of stove tiles was an important part of the pottery business. In 1698, for example, a local potter was paid 2 florins, 5 sous for a stove and in 1714, another potter received 4 florins for the manufacture of a stove. In 1769, one young woman's dowry stipulated, among other things, that her "mother can continue to live in the house her life long, with place in the main room and near the stove for her warmth …"

By the end of the fifteenth century potters in Alsace had organized their own guild and the potters of Soufflenheim were members of the guild. Under the guild's regulations, only registered potters could produce and sell pottery items, while unregistered potters were only allowed to sell their products at fairs. These regulations remained in effect at Soufflenheim until the French Revolution.

The French Revolution

The French Revolution erupted in 1789. This rebellion against noble privileges did not, however, have deep roots in Alsace. The abolition of noble privileges on 4 August 1789 had an effect on the population, but the Revolution's most immediate effect in Soufflenheim was in its relation to the Catholic Church. The Revolution was not confined to a rebellion against the nobility, it also rebelled against the privileges and power of the Church. Only three months after noble privilege was abolished, Church property across France was confiscated and nationalized by the state.

The following summer the Revolution again took aim at the Church. On 12 July 1790 the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was passed into law. This law had great significance in towns like Soufflenheim. It sought to put the France Catholic Church under the control of French society. Key provisions included the local election of bishops and priests, the payment of their salaries by the state, and the requirement that electors sign an oath of loyalty to the constitution. The effect of this law was to eliminate the authority of the Pope over the appointment of clergy. As a result, a schism was created, resulting in a "constitutional church" that was subservient to the state and an illegal and underground Church loyal to the Papacy.

This religious crisis erupted in all corners of France, and it was particularly acute in Alsace. It was through this law that the Revolution was most keenly felt by the inhabitants of Soufflenheim. Most priests in Alsace refused to take the oath (they were known as "refractory priests"), and they were supported by the vast majority of the population. Priests who swore the oath typically found themselves unwelcome by local congregations.

Local and regional government was, however, increasingly sympathetic to revolutionary ideas. These officials condemned and prosecuted refractory priests, to the great displeasure of the faithful. In July 1791, for example, the Mayor of Sessenheim, Soufflenheim's neighbor, arrested several refractory priests. On 24 July, residents of Soufflenheim, led by their mayor, marched to the neighboring town in an effort to free the jailed priests.

At this time, the parish priest at Soufflenheim was pastor Ignace Lemfried. He refused to take the oath required by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. The assistant pastor, Félix Rumpler, also refused. In September 1792 the French government forced both clerics to leave the country. They spent the next 13 months in Baden. The government also closed Saint Michael's church at the end of 1792 and church property was sold at an auction.

Among the town's residents who expressed their support for pastor Lemfried and the other refractory priests was the schoolteacher, Jean Mockers. Because he expressed his opinions openly, he was removed from his teaching responsibilities and imprisoned. Tensions between the Revolution and the population at Soufflenheim continued into 1793. In that year Saint Michael's church was plundered and partly burned. It was during this event that many sacramental records were destroyed. Almost all the burial records were lost, while the baptism records before 1748 and marriage records before 1743 were also lost. In addition, the sacramental register containing marriages between 1754 and 1783 was lost. As a result, the surviving sacramental records are limited to:

- Baptêmes: 1748-1792
- Mariages: 1743-1754, 1783-1792
- Sépultures: 1788-1793.

In autumn 1793, Revolutionary France went to war with the monarchs of Austria and Prussia. Austrian troops invaded northern Alsace, and by October they had occupied Haguenau. A counter offensive was made by the French Army of the Rhine which forced the Austrians to retreat and by the end of December the invaders had abandoned French territory.

Many residents in Bas-Rhin had welcomed the Austrians as liberators and they feared retribution by the French government. Thus, thousands of residents fled Alsace with the Austrian army and took refuge in the Palatinate or Baden. Between 40,000 and 50,000 people fled Bas-Rhin. This event is known as the *Grande Fuite* (or the "Great Flight" in English). Soufflenheim records identify the names of about 90 residents who fled during the Great Flight. These refugees found themselves in a difficult situation. They lived poorly in foreign places while waiting for an opportunity to return home, which was not possible until 1795.

The Simon family from Soufflenheim offers an example. Henry Simon, his wife and children, his father-in-law (Joseph Sensenbrenner), and his brother (Sebastien) all fled Soufflenheim and took refuge in Schwarzach, Baden. The winter of 1794 was hard on the family. Henry Simon's father-in-law died there in January 1794, while Henry Simon, his wife Anna Sensenbrenner, and one of his children, also died at Schwarzach—all three in March 1794. Sebastien Simon took care of his brother's surviving children while they spent another year in exile.

After the fall of Robespierre and the establishment of a new government, the Directory, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was repealed and religious tensions in Soufflenheim began to calm down. In January 1795 a decree by the new government granted refugees the ability to return home. Documents identify about 70 people from Soufflenheim who requested the return of their confiscated property. Sebastien Simon along with his brother's surviving children were among those who returned to the town. Jean Mockers also returned to Soufflenheim and in 1799 he was reinstated as schoolmaster and organist.

During the years of the Revolution, Soufflenheim had gained the reputation of not being "sufficiently revolutionary." For this reason, the administrative center of the canton and the meeting place of its citizens were assigned to towns with much smaller populations—Roeschwoog and Sessenheim respectively. "This adversity on the part of the [regional] authorities," writes Sittler, Elchinger, and Geissert, "was mainly due to the loyalty of the inhabitants to the church."[1]

Three Churches and the Old Cemetery

Soufflenheim was a Catholic community. In 1841, the census counted a population of 2,886 residents, with only 27 non-Catholics living in the town. The Reformation never took hold in the Bailiwick of Haguenau. Early attempts by Protestantism to gain importance there were halted when the Jesuits come to the city in 1567 and stopped the progression of Lutheranism. Haguenau's authorities remained Catholic and Catholicism was retained in Soufflenheim.

Saint Michael's Catholic Church in the center of Soufflenheim is about 190 years old. The first Mass in that building was held in 1830. The Catholic parish, however, was established in the Middle Ages. The earliest written evidence of the parish was recorded by the Abbey of Neubourg when the population paid a tithing to the church in the year 1245. This record is taken as the earliest proof of the church's existence.

Because fire destroyed Soufflenheim's town hall and medieval archive in 1622, the date of construction and the location of the medieval church are not known. Nevertheless, town records from the seventeenth century reference the church. Moreover, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries constant maintenance work on the structure of the medieval church was recorded in municipal accounts. Tiles, bricks, and windows were purchased by the town for repairs to the bell tower, the roof, and other parts of the church in the years between 1664 and 1756.

The 1755 retaining wall in the foreground; The Oelberg (old cemetery) above the wall; and Saint Michel's Church (The "New Church") in the background. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Soufflenheim-St_Michael-02-gje.jpg

In 1761 the town decided to build a new church. Construction began the following year, and the church was consecrated in 1766. This is the building we now refer to as the Old Church. It was located on the Oelberg (the "Mount of Olives" in English). The Oelberg was a hill or mound in the center of Soufflenheim on the north side of the Grand Rue and west of the Rue du Moulin. Today, the

Oelberg is a terrace supported on the east side by a retaining wall seven meters high (23 feet). This wall was originally built in 1755, and the 1766 church was erected inside the wall.

The land surrounding the 1766 church was the town cemetery. Written sources from 1717, 1746 and 1752 identify the Oelberg as the location of the town cemetery. Moreover, the retaining wall constructed in 1755 was originally intended to surround the cemetery (although for what purpose remains unclear). This means that many of our ancestors were buried within the Oelberg.

Soufflenheim experienced tremendous population growth at the end of the eighteenth century, and by 1820 the 1766 church was too small to service the larger population. Construction of a third church, the present one, was approved by the town and work began in 1825. The project was completed in 1830 and it was consecrated in 1831. The New Church is located a block west of the Oelberg. Once the New Church was in full operation, the Old Church in the Oelberg was demolished (in 1833) and the materials were reclaimed for the construction of a new school building. Many of our ancestors were baptized and married in the Old Church or in the medieval church, both of which have been demolished.

After the demolition of the Old Church, the Oelberg was leveled and graded creating the open space terrace we see today. The Oelberg continued to serve as a cemetery and the land on which the Old Church stood was used for burials. In 1874 Soufflenheim transferred its cemetery outside the center of the town and the cemetery at Oelberg was decommissioned.

The Nineteenth Century

In the early part of the nineteenth century, Soufflenheim's population grew significantly. In 1800 the population stood at 1,549 people. By 1836 it had almost doubled to 2,964. This same phenomenon was witnessed in towns and villages across Bas-Rhin. Improved agricultural productivity during the eighteenth century, resulting in part from the use of legumes and potatoes, led to declining mortality in the nineteenth century. At Soufflenheim, population growth leveled off after 1836 and hovered around 3,000 residents for the remainder of the nineteenth century.

During the nineteenth century, Soufflenheim, like the rest of France, was struggling with the convulsions brought about by industrialization and large-scale, factory production. Before the French Revolution the residents of Soufflenheim engaged in subsistence farming (agricultural activities intended for self-consumption, not for commercialization) and, at the same time, the farmers were occupied in various cottage industries. Subsistence farmers practiced trades such as bakers, butchers, shoemakers, sawyers, carpenters, masons, tailors, etc. in order to earn money that could be used to purchase goods not manufactured on a farm. Goods like cast iron cooking pots, for example. In the words of Sittler, Elchinger, and Geissert: "it's important to remember that many artisans also farmed. They were therefore farmer-craftsmen."[2]

The transition to modern industrial employment was exceptionally slow for the residents of Soufflenheim. The social situation in Soufflenheim before 1850 was described as "far from brilliant." There were many people "threatened with hunger … due to the lack of employment." In small towns like Soufflenheim, the new Europe increasingly favored specialization and was determined to destroy the farmer-craftsman.[3]

On the one side, the widening of markets and the distribution of inexpensive factory produced goods from Britain and Prussia reduced the demand for items made by the local cottage industries. On the other side, employment alternatives to cottage work required relocations to urban places like Bischwiller or Mulhouse where factory jobs were concentrated.

Soufflenheim did attempt to join the new Europe. The presence of potters and the availability of clay in the forest encouraged the construction of brick and tile factories which offered industrial employment for residents. One such factory was built in 1825, a second in 1835, and a third in 1847. But Soufflenheim faced a difficult time in the face of modern market competition even in this line of business. Factory production required wide geographic markets, but Soufflenheim's location was a disadvantage when it came to accessing those markets.

> The Strasbourg-Haguenau-Wissembourg railroad [completed in 1855] was 10 kilometers away. This meant that the products of the ceramics industry had to be transported by horse-drawn carriage to Bischwiller. When the Strasbourg-Lauterbourg railroad was built in 1876, Soufflenheim once again found itself in a blind spot. Products had to be transported to the nearest station, Sessenheim. [A railroad station was not located in Soufflenheim until 1895.[4]

As the industrial world took root during the nineteenth century in cities across Europe, Soufflenheim was bypassed and remained an agricultural community that produced crops primarily for self-consumption.

Even the traditional pottery industry was feeling the pressure of industrialization. As the nineteenth century was ending, factory production of enamel and aluminum utensils reduced demand for the clay products made at Soufflenheim. In this context, Léon Elchinger, a Soufflenheim native and son of a potter, spearheaded a drive toward items with an artistic focus. The potters of Soufflenheim incorporated new methods and new chemical combinations to produce decorative and artistic ceramics. These new practices provided a means for Soufflenheim's potters to adapt to industrial competition and sustained the craftsmen for much of the twentieth century.

A Potter's Workshop, 2009.
Source: https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soufflenheim#/media/Fichier:Soufflenheim-Potier(4).jpg

Notes

[1] Cette adversité des autorités est provoquée surtout par la fidélité que gardent les habitants à l'église.

[2] Il faut cependant retenir que de nombreux artisans exploitaient aussi des terres. Ils étaient donc artisans-paysans.

[3] La situation sociale n'est pas brillante à Soufflenheim

Mais, suite manque de travail, de nombreuses personnes sont menacés de famine.

[4] La voie ferrée Strasbourg-Haguenau-Wissembourg (1855) était a 10 kilomètres. Il fallait donc transporter les produits de l'industrie céramique par voitures à chevaux vers Bischwiller. Quand plus tard, en 1876, la voie ferrée Strasbourg-Lauterbourg fut construite, Soufflenheim se trouva une fois de plus dans un angle mort. Il fallait donc acheminer les produits vers la station la plus proche, Sessenheim.

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