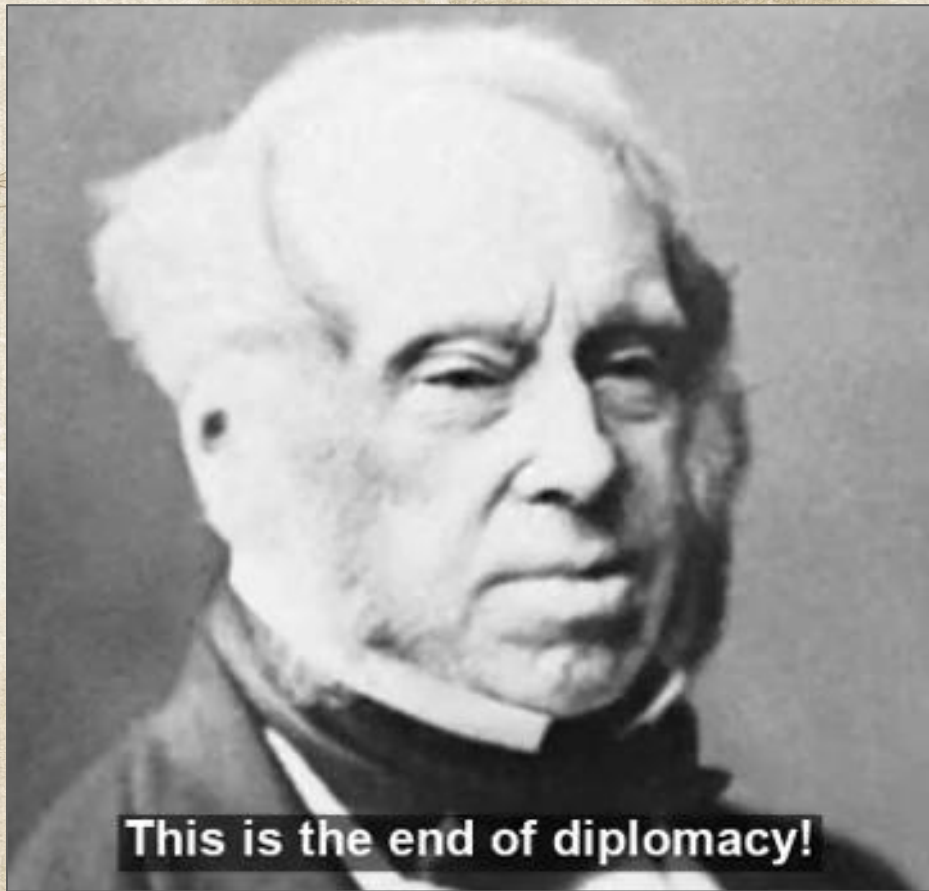# The telegraph:
How it changed diplomacy
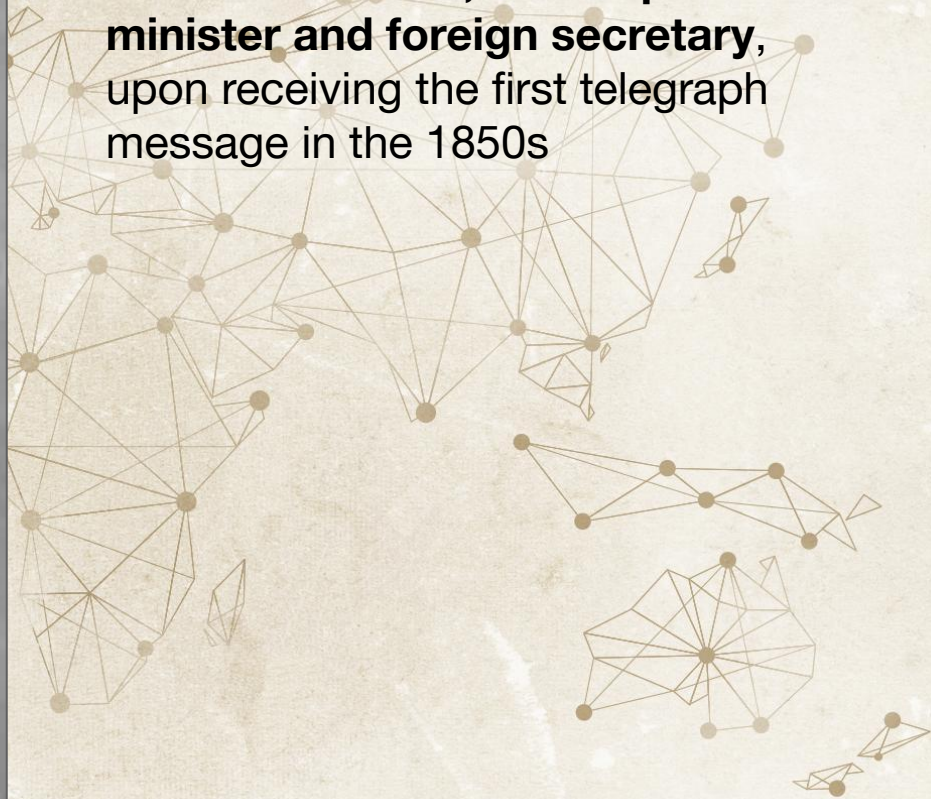
Diplomacy and technology: A historical journey
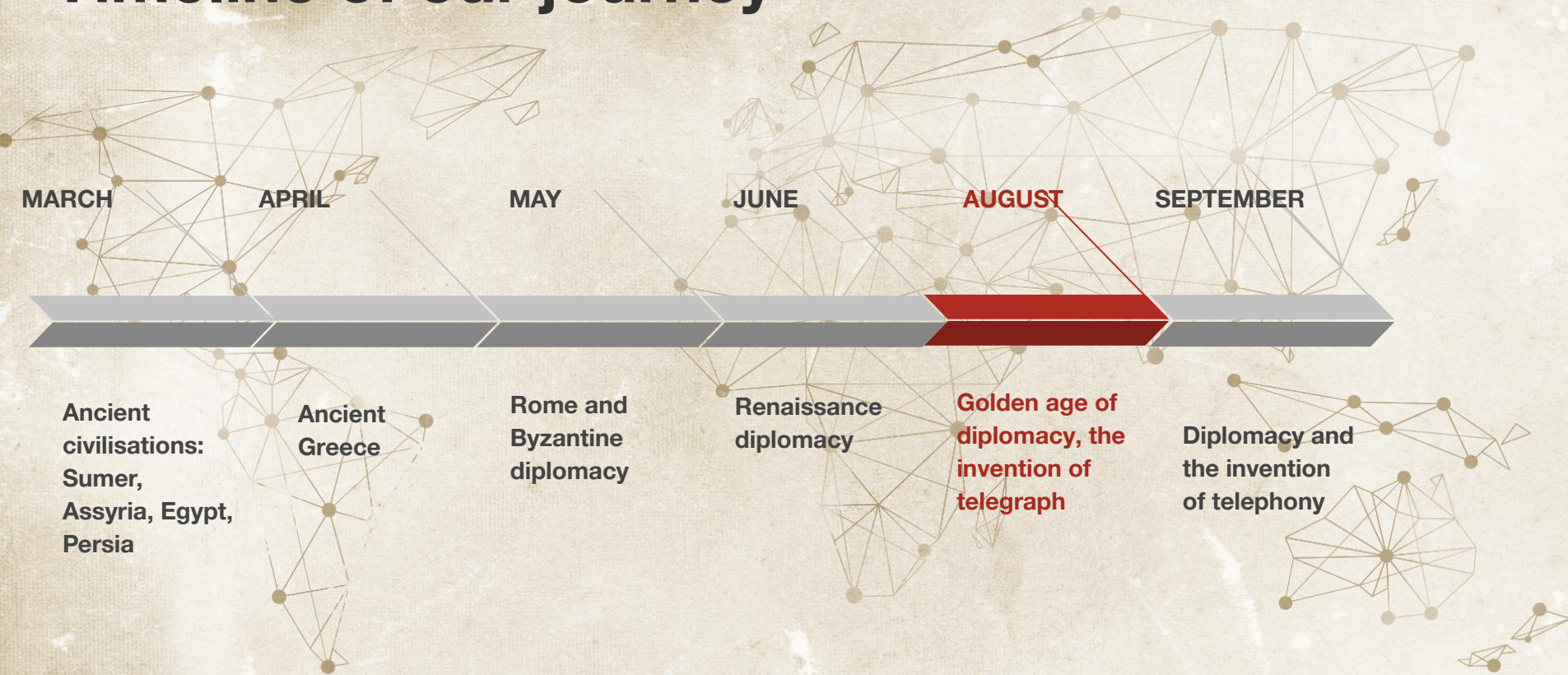
Dr Jovan Kurbalija, August 2021

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This is the end of diplomacy!

Lord Palmerston, British prime minister and foreign secretary, upon receiving the first telegraph message in the 1850s

Timeline of our journey

MARCH APRIL MAY JUNE AUGUST SEPTEMBER

Ancient civilisations: Sumer, Assyria, Egypt, Persia

Ancient Greece

Rome and Byzantine diplomacy

Renaissance diplomacy

Golden age of diplomacy, the invention of telegraph

Diplomacy and the invention of telephony

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A bridge between renaissance and modern diplomacy **(16th-18th century)**

Hugo Grotius (1583-1645)

- Law of nature
- International law
- Law of the sea

Cardinal Richelieu (1585 - 1642)

- Diplomacy as continuous process
- First modern Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Diplomacy based on *raison d'état*

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A bridge between renaissance and modern diplomacy **(16th-18th century)**

Peace of Westphalia

- End of Thirty Years' War between protestant and catholic states.
- Signed in October 1648 in the Westphalian cities of Osnabrück and Münster.
- International order based on the sovereignty of states.

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Paving the way for the Congress of Vienna
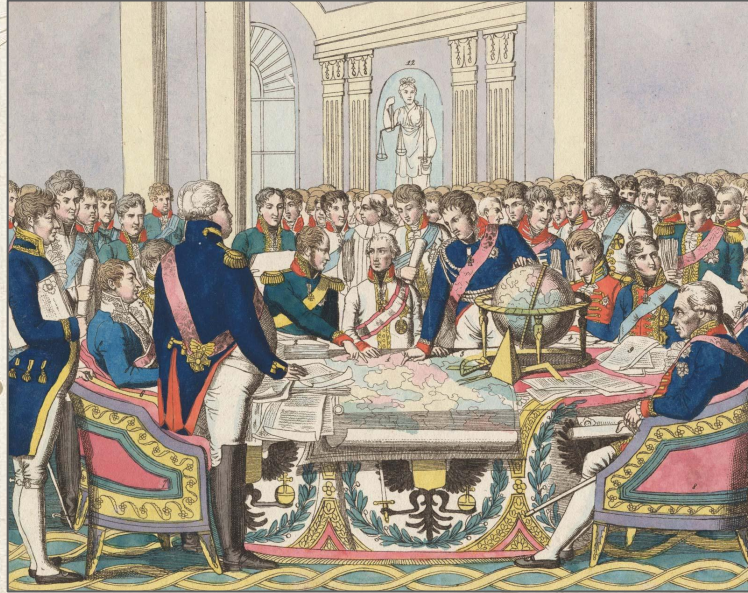
French revolution (1789)

Napoleonic wars (1803 - 1815)

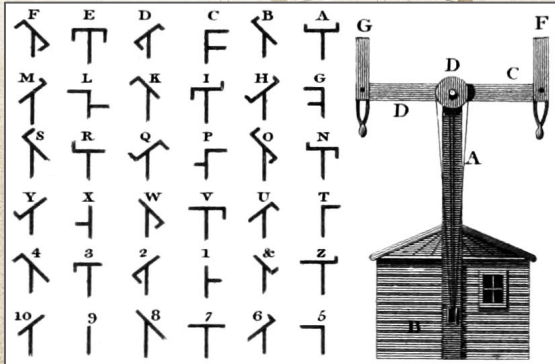# Congress of Vienna (1814/15)

Prince of Talleyrand

Klemens von Metternich

The invention of the telegraph

Mechanical telegraph

- Etymology: Greek τῆλε, (at a distance) and γράφειν, (to write)
- The mechanical telegraph (semaphore) was invented in France by **Claude Chappe** in 1792
- By 1844, France had around 5000 km of semaphore communication lines, used mainly by the military
- Military use (gaining a strategic advantage)
- Non military use (lottery results)
- Other countries joined the telegraph race (Great Britain, Germany..)
- A historical parallel - Chappe's telegraph/Minitel

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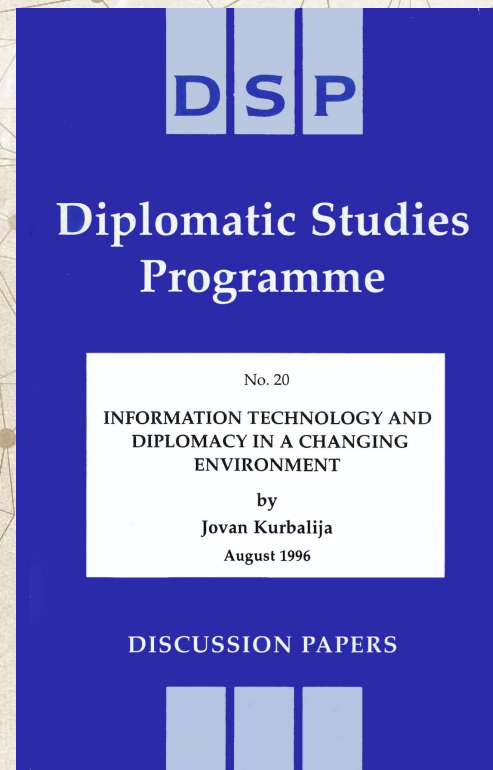# The invention of the telegraph

Electrical telegraph

- 1800 - **Volta** invented electric batteries
- 1820 - **Sömmerring**, experimented with electrochemical reactions and some proto-versions of the telegraph.
- 1820 - **Ampère** conceptualised a needle-telegraph device.
- 1832 - Russian diplomat **Baron Pavel Schilling** developed the first fully functional electric telegraph.
- 1838 - **Cooke and Wheatstone** - first commercial use for traffic communication
- 1850s - **Morse** - the first telegraph line between Washington and Baltimore to use Morse code
- 1858-1866 - Attempts in laying a **trans-Atlantic cable**. Fully reliable link established in 1866
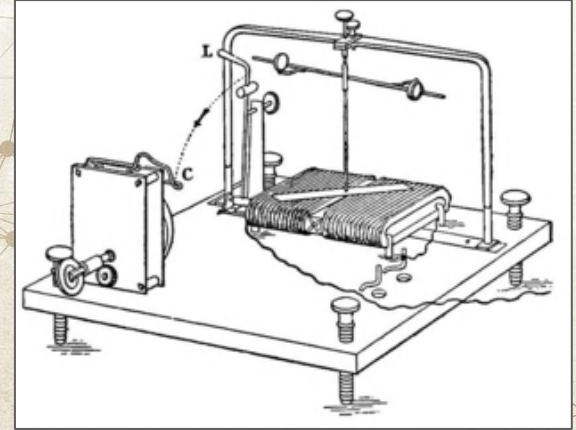
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Methodology - interplay between diplomacy and tech:

- Changing **geo-political ENVIRONMENT** for diplomatic activities

- New **TOPICS** on diplomatic agenda

- New **TOOLS** for diplomatic activities

DSP

Diplomatic Studies Programme

No. 20

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND
DIPLOMACY IN A CHANGING
ENVIRONMENT

by

Jovan Kurbalija

August 1996

DISCUSSION PAPERS

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Changes in the environment for diplomatic activities

- The redistribution of power (Rothschild's loss of communication monopoly)

- Emancipation of women (side-effect)

- Techno-optimism

- Techno-scepticism

- Cable Geo-strategy

EFFECT OF THE SUBMARINE TELEGRAPH; OR, PEACE AND GOOD-WILL BETWEEN ENGLAND AND FRANCE.

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Changes in the environment for diplomatic activities

Cable Geo-strategy

- The control of telegraph cables became of crucial geo-strategic importance
- Great Britain controlled most of the global telegraph network (reasons: communication with colonies; control of the seas; commercial traffic)
- After a series of crises (Tonkin, Siam, and Fashoda), France and Germany started developing their own global cable networks.
- American purchase of Alaska

Early XX century cartoon showing British control of French telegraph communications

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New topic on diplomatic agendas

Main international agreements

- The network of bilateral agreements in Germany

- The West European Telegraph Union (WETU)

- International Telegraph Union (ITU)

- International Bureau of Telegraph Administration, Bern
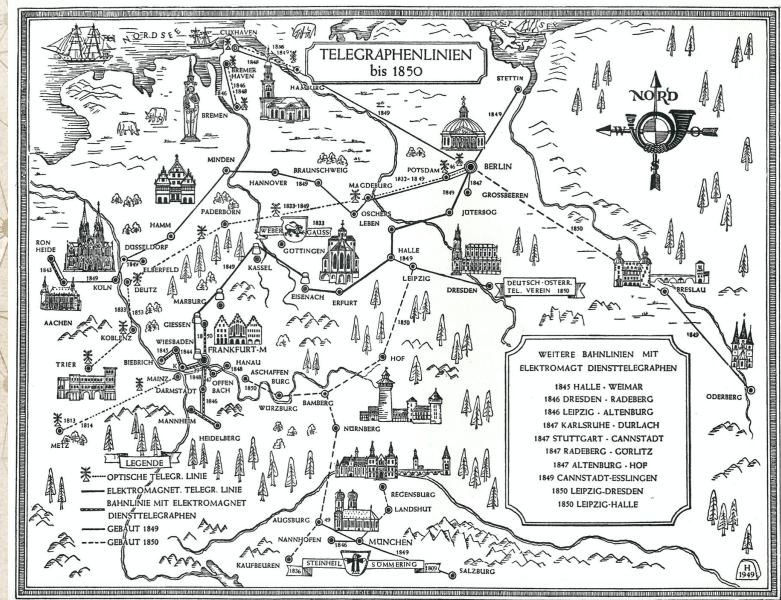
Map of German telegraph lines in 1850
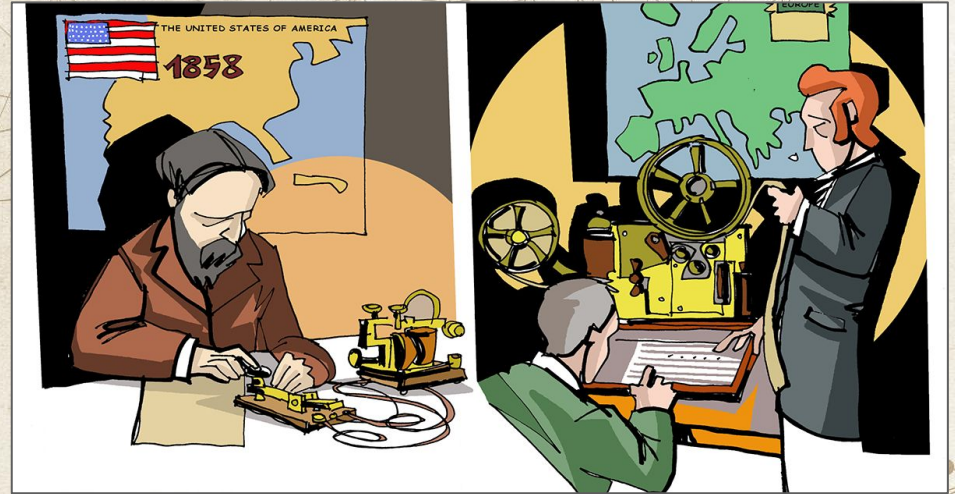
New topic on diplomatic agendas

Issues

Neutrality of telegraph cables in the case of war

- Supported by France and Germany
- Opposed by Great Britain

Privacy of communication

- US and Great Britain - for protecting privacy
- Russia and Germany - for limiting privacy to protect state security

The use of new tools in diplomacy

- 1856 Congress of Paris - the British representative received instructions from Prime Minister Palmerston through coded telegrams.

- In 1866 the US State Department sent the cable to the US Mission in Paris (the cost of the cable was $20,000, while the the total annual budget of the US State Department was $150,000)

- Diplomats often complained (Sir Horace Rumboldt, British ambassador: "The telegraphic demoralisation of those who formerly had to act for themselves and are now content to be at the end of the wire")

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The use of new tools in diplomacy
The use of telegrams as diplomatic tactics

Zimmerman Telegram

- **The Ems telegram** - Bismarck's use of the telegraph to provoke the Franco-Prussian war and German unification.

- **The Zimmerman telegram** - from Berlin to German embassy in Mexico - the telegram was decisive in the US decision to enter the World War I

- **1914 July Crisis use of telegraph** - The contribution of the telegraph to diplomatic failure

The main conclusions

- The need for urgent replies

- The problem of coordinating communication

- The need to prepare concise messages

- The emergence of foreign policy bureaucracy

- The centralisation of diplomacy

- 1814-1914: Statesmen (from leaders to followers)

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Meanwhile in... China

Telegraphy in China

- The first telegraph lines established during the 1860s, by the imperial powers that connected their colonies to Europe.
- The first Chinese line was established in 1871 by Denmark's Great Northern Telegraph Company from Hong Kong to Shanghai.
- Chinese introduced their own telegraph code that differed from the alphabet one.
- In 1876 China's first telegraph school opened, and soon, China secured an educated class of telegraph operators.
- In 1881 the government established the Imperial Telegraph Administration that took control over all the existing networks in the country
- Due to high prices and delays in transmission frequent so that it did not have such a deep impact on the Chinese society as it did in many other countries.

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Cheers! Champagne

'If you're given champagne at lunch, there's a catch somewhere.'

Lord Lyons, British Ambassador to Paris from 1867-1887

Champagne was called '*le vin du diable*', or *'the wine of the devil'*, because at first, the weak glass bottles exploded from the release of the carbon dioxide gas.

When Dom Pérignon tasted champagne for the first time, he exclaimed: '*Come quickly, I am drinking the stars*!'

Dom Pérignon, first tried to **eliminate the bubbles in the wine**, but then he perfected the art, and today he is credited as champagne's inventor.

Champagne was the only wine served at the **Fête de la Fédération** held in July 1790 to toast the outcome of the French Revolution.

Did You Know: Every year over two dozen people are injured by Champagne corks?

*'Champagne. In victory one **deserves it**, in defeat one **needs it**.'*

Napoleon Bonaparte

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