

A-HED

# How to Lead a Nation That Never Existed

Free State of Bottleneck created by mistake after WWI; 'a fairy tale'



Marco Barillaro, Foreign Minister of Free State of Bottleneck, showing off his mock passport in 2012 above the Rhine.

PHOTO: SEPP SPIEGL

By NINA ADAM

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LORCH, Germany—Marco Barillaro is foreign minister of a country that got on the map by cartographic error.

Never mind that his Free State of Bottleneck, now a tiny collection of castles and hillside wineries, lasted only a few years almost a century ago and was never officially recognized. Mr. Barillaro and his government colleagues aim to keep its heritage alive anyway.



Bottleneck's self-appointed, unpaid cabinet meets erratically, usually at a tavern or foreign-ministry headquarters, a rustic restaurant at a campsite. The ministers drink local Riesling and brainstorm plans to promote the region or drum up support among locals.

"When people see me walking through Lorch," says Mr. Barillaro, whose day job is running the campsite, "I can tell it clicks and they are aware of my role."

Free State of Bottleneck, *Freistaat Flaschenhals* in German, came about by a stroke of fate at World War I's close, when Allied powers mapped occupation zones in Germany.

Two carelessly penciled compass arcs around the cities of Koblenz and Mainz left roughly 17,000 people in limbo between the American and French zones, historians say.

Part of the hourglass-shaped blank spot became a diplomatic no-man's-land the size of Gibraltar.

Locals thought it resembled a bottle's neck, cut off from the rest of unoccupied Germany by rough mountains on the cork end and bordered by the Rhine on the other.

"It's unthinkable today and, to be honest, it should have never happened," says German Lt. Col. Achim Kloppert, a military historian who has visited the region more than a hundred times. "Officers at the time clearly did a sloppy job."

The region, including the Rhine villages Lorch and Kaub, created territorial friction. France tried to snag the area, but residents wanted no part of France and pushed to rejoin Germany, says Bottleneck President Peter Josef Bahles.

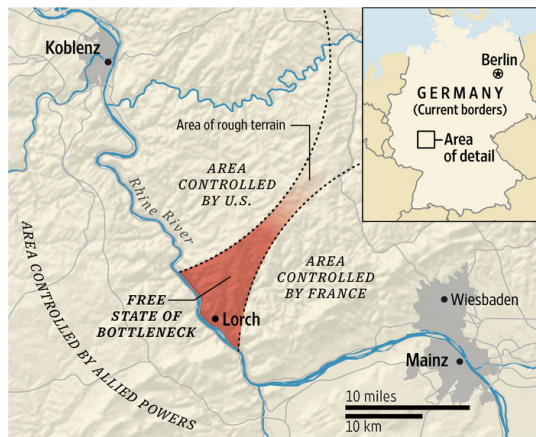
"Most people think it was a joke," says Monika Kunz, a local vintner, "but it was deadly earnest."

People of the steep valley begrudgingly established a government, printed money and lived an outlaw existence: No country recognized Bottleneck, and its neighbors forbade commerce with it, so the occupiers deemed its foreign trade to be smuggling.

Locals adapted to their absurd predicament. Bottleneck's "emergency money" depicted people drinking local wine. "If Adam had only had the wine from Lorch, he would not have eaten the Apple," reads the scrip, cherished by collectors. "This grape juice would have deafened him to Eve's cunning plan."

### Caught Between the Lines

Two carelessly drawn arcs around the German cities of Koblenz and Mainz following WWI created a diplomatic no-man's-land, known as the 'Free State of Bottleneck.'



Source: Free State of Bottleneck Initiative, Historians THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The wine proved more liquid than the bank notes. Rhine boat crews paid for Bottleneck wine and liquor with meat, coal and other goods scarce in the outlaw land, locals say.

"It sounds like a fairy tale," says Alan Sked, Professor of International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

"Something as amusing, comical and magical as this, you do not usually associate with German history."

It isn't clear when Bottleneck ended its estrangement, historians say. Locals say it was when the French occupied

it in 1923. University of Mainz historian Stephanie Zibell says it was probably when French forces left in 1924.

Bottleneck reverted to German jurisdiction, but survived in local lore.

Residents took pride in a former border-crossing post, left from the Bottleneck era, that made a cameo in the 1960 Elvis Presley movie "G.I. Blues."

In 1994, some residents decided to revive the ersatz nation and declare themselves its government. They created a flag and coat of arms.

"Ministers are appointed according to their skills and abilities," Mr. Barillaro says, noting he qualified as foreign minister through his sound knowledge of computers and new media.

"It's great to be the Tourism Minister, because I get to sample all the best wine and food," says Harald Kutsche, a restaurant head chef who has led the Ministry of Tourism since 1994. "You receive special attention."

To attract tourists, the cabinet organizes annual wine tastings at venues such as a baroque estate overlooking the Rhine that also serves as a dental clinic and beauty spa.

But it is usually the same faces that show up and quaff free wine, locals say.

About 15 years ago, a local bank helped issue a regional currency, the Bottleneck taler, for payments in local shops and restaurants. Few of the silver coins circulated, as collectors and speculators snapped them up.

With silver's price down, leaders see a chance to issue new talers, but the minting machine is too outdated, says President Bahles.

Then there are the passports. The government has sold about 4,000 so far to locals and visitors. Another 2,000 are on order. The mock documents cost up to €55 (about \$59) and hold only novelty value. Their real draw is an accompanying three-course meal.

"I don't let my clout hang out," says Michael Roessler, whose title is Minister of Environment, Conservation and Reactor Safety, although there is no nuclear reactor nearby, "but I happily show off my passport to curious tourists."

Manfred Rose, a semiretired tour guide from Wiesbaden, about an hour's drive away, enjoys confusing customs officials with his Bottleneck passport. "It can be a real door opener, but unfortunately not all international airports deem it fit for a visa," says Mr. Rose, who has collected stamps in his Bottleneck passport from over a dozen countries. He also presents his German passport.

Bottleneck faces frequent military incursions. Officers from a German army base up the Rhine often visit the local site of a daring 1814 river crossing by Prussian and Russian troops chasing Napoleon.

Bottleneck leaders say young Germans should appreciate the region's history more. One and two centuries ago, says Mr. Barillaro, it was "a bulwark against the French."

The cabinet now wants to establish ceremonial ties with other micro-entities, like the Free State of Boyard on France's coast. Last year, Boyard President Marc Vigneron-Larosa visited Bottleneck, although both sides stress it wasn't a diplomatic mission.

"We are interested in establishing a relationship," says Mr. Vigneron-Larosa.

As to the question of "whether micro-nations have a future," he says: "It goes without saying."

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