The Battle of Dornach 1499: A Contest Between Two Early Tactical Infantries

Albert Winkler

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs_review

Part of the European History Commons, and the European Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs_review/vol58/iss1/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swiss American Historical Society Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
The Battle of Dornach 1499:
A Contest Between
Two Early Tactical Infantries

by Albert Winkler

In July of 1499, two well-trained tactical infantries fought at the Battle of Dornach when the Swiss peasants and Swabian mercenaries or Landsknechte met in a major engagement for the first time. The Swiss infantry had been dominating battlefields in many parts of Europe for decades, but the Battle of Dornach was a close contest demonstrating that Swiss dominance might be over and a new age of infantries was soon to begin. While tactical infantries had been deployed on the field of battle for centuries, this was one of the few times in the Middle Ages that two of them met head to head.
The Swiss first developed the tactics that both they and the Swabians would use in the Battle of Dornach. In a lengthy development that took nearly two centuries to complete, the Swiss developed their advanced infantry tactics. By the Burgundian War of 1474-77, the Swiss had developed their mature military system usually deploying for battle in three square battle formations called Haufen (heap, mass) or pike squares. These squares were arranged close enough to support each other but were also capable of independent maneuvers. Rows of men on each side of the structure wielded pikes which were spears roughly eighteen feet in length and were designed to thwart cavalry attacks. In the center of the formation, the men carried halberds, a pole five to eight feet in length with an ax blade for slashing, a spear point for thrusting, and a hook for pulling cavalrymen off their mounts. When gunpowder came into use, this formation also used men with Harquebuses or early muskets to shoot at their enemies. The Swiss used the pike square with great skill and discipline, and they often kept this tight formation during challenging maneuvers including going up steep slopes or even crossing rivers.

When engaging the enemy, the pikemen would strike first. These troops often stood the length of one arm or about three feet apart, so they could wield their weapons effectively. The space between the men allowed the halberdiers to rush past the pikemen to engage the enemy at close quarters using their shorter weapons. If the pike square was surrounded by superior forces, it would stop advancing and then turn its weapons outward in a formation called the Igel (hedgehog) to meet attacks from all directions. Once formed, the hedgehog was never penetrated by enemy forces in over 200 years of combat.1

---

The effectiveness of the Swiss military system was demonstrated in a spectacular fashion at the Battle of Murten in 1476. In a victory which gained the attention of all of Europe, the Swiss annihilated an army of Charles the Bold of Burgundy. This was a sensation and meant that the Swiss formations and weaponry would be copied in many lands, and infantries would eventually replace cavalry as the most important segment of European armies. According to the eminent German military historian, Hans Delbrück, the Swiss victory at Murten started a military revolution making it the greatest turning point in military tactics since the battle of Marathon in 490 BC.2

An early test of the Swiss system came in the Swabian War of 1499, when they met the Swabian Landsknechte using similar tactics and formations. The war took place because the Habsburg Emperor Maximilian I was attempting to unify the German Empire to meet internal threats from discontented regions, as well as the external

---

threats of France on the west and the advancing Turks on the southeast. Maximilian realized he must have an active, powerful army to resist such internal and external threats and began to reorganize the Habsburg army in the mid 1480s, and he hired Swiss mercenaries to teach the Swabians how to fight using their methods. These forces soon showed success on the battlefields of Europe, and they became eager to test their abilities against their former teachers, whom they deeply hated stemming from raids and petty intermittent warfare between the two peoples over many generations.

Maximilian tried to enhance the unity of the German Empire under his control by introducing a tax called the Common Penny to acquire funds, and the use of the Imperial Supreme Court to control judicial matters. The Swiss refused to recognize these reforms, and when the court passed judgments unfavorable to them, the Swiss became openly hostile. At that point, both sides began to prepare for war by massing troops on their borders. In the cold winter months of 1499, the Swiss and Swabian troops faced each other across the Rhine River in an uneasy peace, and they amused themselves by shouting insults back and forth. At one point, the Landsknechte mocked the Swiss by composing unchristian and offensive songs. The final affront came when the German mercenaries offended the Swiss’s sexual preferences. The Swabians displayed a cow and called to the Swiss to come over and make love to the animal. The men then mooed like cows and calves. The Swiss retaliated by staging a raid in which they burned a house and a stall. At this point, the war began in earnest.³

The Swabian War was poorly planned by each antagonist, and overall strategy consisted largely of border raids which involved the destruction of villages and the seizure of booty. Only a handful of major engagements took place which never involved the entire armies of either side, and the conflict has been described as war for war’s sake.

An estimated 200 villages were destroyed on both sides and 20,000 people were killed. The Habsburg forces constructed bastions in the Alps east of the Swiss lands, from which the Austrians raided down the Alpine valleys, plundering and burning. In the battles of Frastanz and Calven, the Swiss and their allies marched up the valleys and over nearby mountains in impressive feats of discipline and stamina to attack the enemy positions. The Battle of Calven was a costly victory for the Swiss, but they had removed important Habsburg bases of operation.

By July 1499, the war was going badly for the Empire. The Swiss had been successful in defeating the Imperial forces in every important engagement of the war, and the Empire’s operations in the mountains of the Tirol and the Grey Leagues had floundered. But Maximilian still had some reason for optimism. He had assembled large armies around Constance and in the Sundgau Valley near Basel. Most of the troops in those areas had not seen any major action, and many were still eager to punish the Swiss and seek revenge for enemy raids. Yet any significant operations would have to take place soon because funds were nearly exhausted, the troops were complaining of a lack of pay, and some were deserting to return home. A single key victory could secure enough booty to keep the armies intact, and such a success would doubtlessly strengthen Maximilian’s war effort and might even convince the Swiss to come to favorable terms with the Empire.4

Maximilian’s plan was to make a demonstration in one area to divert attention and then to stage a significant strike in the other simultaneously. The largest Swiss force concentrations were around Constance, watching the Empire’s troop movements very closely. A large advance in that area would attract a good deal of attention, but a demonstration of force from Constance should not risk battle because

a defeat might break up or even destroy the imperial army. The main attack would take place farther west, and Maximilian ordered Heinrich von Fürstenberg to advance from the Sundgau to take the strategic castle of Dorneck in the Birs Valley near Basel. Dorneck was a strategic focal point for a large area of the Swiss Confederation. From there, an army could march west to the Jura mountain passes, southwest to Bern, south to Solothurn, or east to Olten, and from Olten, down the Aara Valley to the Zurich area.5

5 Johann Lenz, Der Schwabenkrieg, (Zürich: Orell Fussli, 1849), 136.
In May and June 1499, Fürstenberg assembled his army in the Sundgau of south Alsace. It numbered between 10,000 and 15,000 men, but these troops varied much in quality. Many were simple conscripts who had little interest in the campaign or its outcome. Others were the superb *Landsknechte* from the Gelderland, numbering over 2,000 men who were very able and experienced German mercenaries. The infantry was armed in a similar fashion as were the Swiss with long pikes and other shorter weapons much like the halberd. The army had many large artillery pieces for sieges and smaller cannons to be used.
against the enemy infantry in battle. The cavalry consisted of 1,100 of
the feared and respected Welsch Guard (French guard) from Burgundy.
These were heavily armored men and horses, who were very effective
in battle and known for running down their enemies. However, due
to lack of pay, these knights were poorly motivated and proved to be
largely ineffective in battle because they were more interested in taking
booty than in the conflict.⁶

Fürstenberg could have marched on Dorneck early in July and
met little resistance, but he decided to await the arrival of more horses,
thus allowing the Swiss more time to react to his threat and prepare a
better defense. Solothurn purchased the castle of Dorneck in 1490, and
the city recognized the strategic value of the fortress and manned the
position throughout the war. Benedikt Hugi led the small garrison of
slightly more than 20 men, and their commander was concerned about
his ability to protect the castle in case of attack. He wrote to Solothurn
frequently for more men and support. The city finally reacted on July
9, 1499, and sent masons to repair the castle and artillery pieces to
strengthen the fortress, but these preparations were unfinished when
the enemy army arrived.⁷

Solothurn sent its mayor, Niklaus Conrad, and 1,500 men to
Gempen, a village about four miles from Dorneck, to watch the area
and harass the imperial forces should they advance. A Swiss army
of 6,000 men was watching the enemy forces at Constance, but the
demonstration from that fortress was unimpressive, so Solothurn
was able to convince them that the greatest danger was at Dorneck.
When the Swiss facing Constance heard that Fürstenberg’s army was

⁶ “Anonyme Chronik des Schwabenkrieges” in Basler Chroniken, 7 vols.
(Leipzig: Hirzel, 1872-1915) 6: 11; Anshelm, Berner-Chronik, 2: 218; Tatarinoff,
Beteiligung, 166-7; and Reiter, “Schwabenkrieg,” 146.

⁷ Anton Haffner, Chronica (Solothurn: Zepfel, 1849), 58-9; Carl von Elgger,
Kriegswesen und Kriegskunst der Schweizerischen Eidgenossen in XIV., XV, und XVI
Jahrhundert (Lucerne: Militärisches Verlagsbureau, 1873), 388; Anshelm, Berner
Chronik, 2: 192; and Fritz Rieter, “Der Schwabenkrieg vor 450 Jahren,” Schweizer
Monatshefte 29 (June 1949): 145.
approaching the castle near Basel, most of them marched to Gempen as rapidly as possible. For the first time in the war, Bern, angered by Swabian raids, sent a large contingent of 3,000 men to help Solothurn. On July 20, 1499, the Swiss contingents began to reach Gempen.8

The imperial army started to arrive near Dorneck early on July 22, 1499, and those troops began to prepare a siege according to all the accepted practices of the age. The nearby villages, including Dornach, had already been destroyed during a raid in March, so the armed forces found little to plunder in the area. July 22 was St. Mary Magdalene’s day, and the army took advantage of the holiday. The men played games, danced, and sang in the fields between the villages of Dornach and Arlesheim. Only the artillerymen were busy because they had to dig into the ground to lay the largest siege cannons on the correct trajectory to hit the castle while absorbing the recoil of the weapons at the same time. Smaller artillery pieces were placed around the castle to shoot in various directions in case of an enemy advance. Those devices were also placed on the road between Dornach and Gempen to ward off any possible Swiss attack by that route. This was the only real precaution taken against the possibility of a surprise attack. Fürstenberg’s men failed to place lookouts and to send scouts to reconnoiter the area. A man from Basel came to warn the troops that Swiss forces were nearby, but his timely caution was ignored.9

Niklaus Conrad could see the entire imperial army from the Schartenfluh hill, and he believed that a surprise attack in sufficient strength could be successful, but all available manpower would be needed to be present to make such an effort. Additional Swiss forces started to arrive in the morning, but they were tired, hungry, and wet with sweat from their long marches. By the early afternoon, they numbered over 5,000 excellent troops. Among them were 3,000 Bernese troops and another 400 from Zurich. The men from Solothurn

---

shared food and wine with these men, and they were given some time to rest.\textsuperscript{10}

The only groups that were still on the march were 600 men from Luzern and 400 from Zug. The Swiss war council decided to go into battle without these additional men because if the attack were long delayed there would be little chance of concluding the battle before nightfall, but they hoped that the expected contingents would arrive in time to aid in the outcome of the battle. This time the Swiss advanced in two pike squares, a vanguard (\textit{Vorhut}) and a main formation (\textit{Gewalthaufen}), believing that the men from Luzern and Zug would comprise the rear guard (\textit{Nachhut}) when they arrived on the scene. To avoid detection, the men marched through the forest instead of using the road. These forces started their advance in the mid afternoon.\textsuperscript{11}

The Swiss battle plan was complicated, but it could be successful if total surprise was achieved. Niklaus Conrad was the commander of the vanguard, comprised mostly of men from Solothurn. When this formation advanced from the forest, it divided into two groups. The smaller one turned to capture some small artillery pieces, while the larger one, led by Conrad, went straight for the large siege cannons, which they were successful in taking. Heinrich von Fürstenberg heard the noise and came to see what was happening. He got too close to the Swiss who dragged him from his horse and killed him. At the very outset of the battle, the imperial army was deprived of its commander, but much of his army continued the contest without him. Conrad’s group pushed on westward right through the center of the Swabian camp. These men were surprised, thrown into great confusion, and many, including the Welsch Guard, fled across the Birs stream.

Conrad and his men had shown great initiative, but that vanguard was too small to keep the imperial army long in confusion. The Swabian Army began to form up into battle formations, and the


\textsuperscript{11}Tatarinoff, \textit{Beteiligung}, 175.
Welsch Guard returned to threaten Conrad’s forces. The Swiss vanguard was soon hard pressed and was forced to fall back towards the forest. This contingent was only spared from slaughter by the skillful use of the pike and musket.12

The smaller part of the vanguard was able to take the enemy cannons, but it soon met stiff resistance as well. These men had to fight desperately to keep from being overwhelmed, but they took heavy casualties in doing so. This group was saved from annihilation when the Swiss main formation (Gewalthaufen) of 3,000 men from Bern broke clear of the forest. The main force had advanced as rapidly as possible, but the dense undergrowth had slowed its progress. By the time it entered the field of battle, both sections of the vanguard were in grave danger, and the Swabian mercenaries (Landsknechte), were forming into a large pike square. The smaller Swiss groups in the vanguard fell back to join the main formation, and these combined forces then marched to meet the German infantry.13

At that point, the battle became one of German foot soldiers against the Swiss infantry because the Swabian cavalry, and some of the Welsch Guard, withdrew from the fight. Many of them were raiding far away, and the four hundred remaining were more interested in robbing the dead than in actually participating in battle. The artillery was also no factor in the contest even after the Swabian cannoneers returned to their weapons after being chased off the field. They were unable to use their artillery pieces effectively because their larger weapons were aimed high to hit Dorneck and they were unable to train them on the enemy. The Swiss were also forced to leave their cannons behind because they could not bring them through the dense forest to the battlefield.

The German mercenaries and the Swiss fought it out on the fields between Dornach and Arlesheim. The contest was costly and a prominence on the field of battle became known as “Blood Hill.” For

---

12 Anshelm, Berner-Chronik, 2: 229.
13 Lenz, Schwabenkrieg, 152.
hours the two armies fought, the outnumbered Swiss making up in ferocity what they lacked in manpower. No doubt, each side engaged by thrusting forward with their pikes, while the men with halberds looked for any opening to rush forward and engage the enemy at close quarters. The troops with muskets also fired into the ranks of the opposition bringing noise, smoke, and casualties inflicted at a distance to the battle. Both armies pushed back and forth against each other as the fighting swayed over the fields. Whenever one force made an advance into the other, there would be a rally by the opposition, and the front would again become stable. There was little chance for maneuver because any change in the disposition of the troops invited an attack by the other side before the redeployment could be complete. Neither side was able to break the other’s ranks successfully, the battle continued to rage fiercely, and the men on both sides became increasingly exhausted. The battle appeared to be a stalemate if nothing changed.

As nightfall was approaching, the battle was finally decided by the timely arrival of Swiss reinforcements from Luzern and Zug. These troops entered the field of battle near Arlesheim, shouting and blowing horns, as they rushed to join the Swiss main mass. With these fresh reinforcements, the Swiss staged their final attack. The weight of the advance of the reinvigorated Swiss was too much for the exhausted German mercenaries to bear, and they broke and fled. When they had stood in the ranks, the Landsknechte had been able to inflict as many casualties as they had suffered, but their losses mounted rapidly when they were in flight, because they could no longer protect themselves in battle array. The Swiss, furious after their costly and difficult victory, pursued their enemies as they attempted to flee across the Birs stream, killing everyone of them when they could be apprehended. In the ensuing darkness and confusion as night fell, the Swiss fell upon their own men, killing each other. When all of the men in the imperial army had fled across the Birs and night had fallen, further pursuit became

---

impossible. Then the exhausted Swiss laid down on their weapons where they were and slept.\textsuperscript{15}

The contest between the Swiss and the German mercenaries was bitter, and experienced soldiers testified to the ferocity of the battle. About 3,000 German mercenaries, largely in their flight at the end of the contest, and 500 Swiss had been killed in the battle. The Swiss were given proper burials, but their adversaries were left to rot. Imperial emissaries sought to retrieve the bodies of the fallen noblemen, but the Swiss replied that the nobles would have to remain on the field of battle with the dead peasants. Only the body of Heinrich von Fürstenberg was taken from the field to the church at Arlesheim.\textsuperscript{16}

The Swiss showed a great deal of concern for their wounded and for the families of the dead. The wounded were taken to nearby towns where they were cared for until they had fully recuperated. By common consent of the troops, all the booty taken in the battle was divided among the wounded and the widows and orphans of the dead.\textsuperscript{17}

After the battle, the Swiss had an excellent opportunity to march into Alsace or the Swabian lands, but the army showed no interest in such advances. They remained for six days on the battlefield and then returned home. Skirmishes took place in the area for days, but the fighting soon died down. When Maximilian heard the news of the Swiss victory, he ceased his military activities, which had become little more than an artillery exchange between armies around Constance.\textsuperscript{18}

The Empire’s war effort nearly collapsed because continued fighting was considered to be fruitless, and military activity dropped off until early in August, when there was hardly any fighting at all. On September 22, 1499, the protagonists signed the Peace of Basel. According to the agreement, Maximilian recognized no further authority to tax or to put

\textsuperscript{16} “Hauptleute etc. der Stadt Bern im Feld an Bern,” July 24, 1499 in Aktenstücke zur Geschichte des Schwabenkrieges, 389-90 and Tatarinoff, Beteiligung, 183.
\textsuperscript{17} Elgger, Kriegswesen, 172-3.
\textsuperscript{18} Brennwald, Schweizerchronik, 2: 455.
courts over the Swiss states. But much had changed because of the Battle of Dornach. The Swiss would soon lose their dominance, and the German mercenaries were on the ascendency.

~ Utah Valley University