The Battle of Morgarten in 1315: An Essential Incident in the Founding of the Swiss State

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The Battle of Morgarten in 1315:
An Essential Incident in the Founding of the Swiss State

by
Albert Winkler

Political realities in the German Empire at the beginning of the fourteenth century were harsh, and communities that wanted to gain or maintain their autonomy had to deal with serious external threats. Most frequently, this meant that military success was essential for survival. Many forces vied for authority, influence, and domination over the regions that formed the Swiss Confederation, which later developed into the modern state of Switzerland. The largest threat to Swiss sovereignty in this period was factions of nobles, most importantly the house of Habsburg, which were expanding their control over the region. By the early fourteenth century, the states of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden had been cooperating with each other for decades to resist outside forces, and their resolve to retain their autonomy was severely tested in 1315 when a large Habsburg army came to plunder and subjugate these states. The sovereignty of the Swiss republics was clearly at stake, and the significant victory in the battle of Morgarten meant that they would survive and continue to develop their own national expression. This success probably kept the modern cantons of Switzerland from being little more than the nearby Austrian provinces of the Voralberg and Tirol. The achievement at Morgarten was also significant in a social sense because it was an early victory of free peasants, which allowed them to keep their liberties and independence in the face of challenges from the feudal forces that attempted to control them.  


article will address the development of the early Swiss to 1315 and demonstrate how political and social realities led to war. This essay will also analyze the battle of Morgarten by a careful use of the primary sources to clarify many aspects of the engagement.

Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden were the first members of the Swiss Confederation. Often referred to as the “Forest States” or “Forest Cantons” (Waldstätte), these small communities were struggling for their autonomy as they faced external threats. During much of the late Middle Ages, Uri and Schwyz were part of the Zurich district over which the Habsburg family had authority. While the people of these states were largely free peasants and often chose their own leaders, the Habsburgs still held judicial powers over them and could arbitrate or pass judgment on their activities, especially dealing with foreign relations. A major step toward self-rule for the Swiss was the granting of charters of independence (Freibrief or Freheitsbrief) for both Uri and Schwyz by the Hohenstaufen Emperors of Germany, Henry VII and Frederick II. Henry conferred this concession to Uri in 1231 and Frederick gave it to Schwyz in 1240. These endowments affirmed that the states were under the authority of the Emperor (Reichsunmittelbar or Reichsfrei) making them independent from the local feudal powers including the Habsburgs, but this sovereignty had to be put into practice, and many issues remained unresolved. While Uri retained this status, Schwyz and the Habsburg family engaged in a lengthy contest relating to judicial authority, even though that state controlled much of its domestic affairs, and it became the most militant power in resisting the Habsburg threat to the independence of the Forest States.

More than a century later, the Bernese chronicler, Conrad Justinger, presented quaint details on the oppression of the people of Schwyz by the Habsburg rulers. Justinger claimed the Habsburg overlords (amtlüte) placed over the peasants acted in a “completely outrageous” (gar frevenlich) manner by abusing “pious people, wives, daughters, and young women, and [the overlords] wanted to force their immoral desires [on them],” causing the people to rebel. While this account certainly made the Schwyzers

1891), pp. 206*-19*. The * designates the page numbers of sources in the appendix.

4Conrad Justinger, Die Berner-Chronik (Bern: Wyss, 1871), p. 46. “Oouch waren die amptlüte gar frevenlich gen fromen luit, wiben, tochtern und jungfrowen, und wolten iren mutwillen mit gewalt triben, daz aber die erben lüte die lengen nit vertragen mochten; und sassen sich also wider die amptlüte.” See also, Richard Feller and Edgar Bonjour, Geschichtsschreibung der Schweiz: vom Spätmittelalter zur Neuzeit (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1979), pp. 7–11. Justinger wrote near the year 1420.
appear to be virtuous and innocent victims, Justinger clearly exaggerated. The communities of Schwyz commonly elected their own local leaders, and there were few if any Habsburg overseers nearby to abuse the people on such a personal level.

The contest between the Swiss and the Habsburgs also dealt with personal liberties because the peasants were trying to get and maintain broader privileges. At that time, there were sharp distinctions between the peasants who were free and unfree. The serfs were held in bondage, they owned no land, were tied to the manor, and could even be sold with it. They owed service without payment to the landowner, and the lord controlled local justice in the manorial court. Serfs even had to get permission from the lord to marry. Critically, the nobles held the right to provide military protection, and those in bondage could not perform this vital function. The authority to defend the state was a necessary step toward individual liberties and the independence of society and the state. In fact, the right to bear arms was often the most obvious privilege which separated the free from the unfree. The free peasants could also leave the service of the landowner and appeal to higher courts thus circumventing local manorial justice to look for fairer judgments to their petitions. The peasants coveted these rights, and those who enjoyed them wanted to keep and protect them from any threat.

The people of Schwyz enjoyed more freedoms than those of the other Forest States, but the residents of Uri also maintained many liberties even though some of them owed loyalty to local landowners and church men. The opening of the St. Gotthard Pass over the Alps, probably in 1236, made Uri an important station on a major trade route, and the community charged tolls and transportation fees, enhancing its wealth and importance. In contrast, much of the land in Unterwalden was owned by persons living outside the area, and comparatively few free peasants lived there. While many of these people still owed service to lords and church estates, they were clearly agitating for liberties such as those enjoyed by their sister states nearby.

The Habsburg family tried to assert control over Schwyz and the other Forest States by a policy of encirclement. One method was to control trade. Count Rudolf III von Habsburg, the Silent (der Schweigsame), constructed the fortress of Neuhabsburg from 1241 to 1244 on the shores of Lake Luzern on a prominence between Luzern and Küsnacht to control

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6Sidler, Morgarten, pp. 32–41.
commerce by that route. The Emperors Rudolf I von Habsburg, who reigned from 1273 to 1291, and his son, Albrecht I, who ruled from 1297 to 1307, followed this policy. Wielding the combined power of the Habsburg faction and the Imperial prerogatives, they extended their influence on the approaches to the Forest States by acquiring literally dozens of towns, areas, and courts by many means, including inheritance and purchase, thus effectively controlling access to the Forest States from the east, north, and west. Among the areas gained by Rudolf was the city of Zug, from which the Habsburg army would march on Schwyz in 1315. Equally important was the purchase of Interlaken by Albrecht in 1306 that was also an assembly point from which the Habsburgs launched their attack on Unterwalden at the same time as the invasion of Schwyz. Also significant was Rudolf's extension of control over the monastery of Einsiedeln in 1283. The people of Schwyz and the Forest States took the threats very seriously, and began a vigorous policy in 1293 of small-scale warfare to thwart Habsburg interests. During wars and other international crises, these impediments threatened the Swiss states.

The Forest States also looked to each other for mutual support and protection politically and militarily. An undated document, written perhaps between 1244 and 1252, mentioned an agreement between Luzern and the towns of Buochs and Stans, both in Unterwalden. Pope Innocent IV wrote a letter on 28 Aug. 1247 condemning a pact between Schwyz, Luzern, and Sarnon, a town in Unterwalden. The Holy Father was supporting a plea by Count Rudolf III von Habsburg who claimed that he owned these areas, and he feared they were operating autonomously. Innocent angrily criticized this agreement because it aided Emperor Frederick II with whom the Pope was then at war.

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7 Sidler, pp. 44, 48–54.
8 Ibid., pp. 114–5.
11 "Breve des Papstes Innocenz IV. gegen Schwyz, Sarnen und Luzern. Lyon 28 August 1247" as cited in Wilhelm Oechsli, ed. Quellenbuch zur Schweizergeschichte (Zürich: Schulthess, 1918), pp. 43–4. This is a translation of the document from Latin into German.
Map of the Forest States by Dan McClellan
Future members of the Swiss Confederation entered into at least one agreement in 1291. Since the Federal Charter (Bundesbrief) of August 1291 may be a forgery, the first authentic pact of that year was endorsed by Zurich, Uri, and Schwyz on 16 Oct. 1291. These states designed the agreement to last three years, but it became invalid when the Habsburgs defeated Zurich in 1292, and the city had to come to terms with its adversaries, losing its ability to act independently. Zurich later sent troops to support the Habsburg forces at the battle of Morgarten. Ironically, the best interest of the city in the long term rested with a victory of its adversaries in that engagement.

Long before the encounter at Morgarten, the men of Schwyz demonstrated significant military ability, and the statements by early historians of the battle that the Schwyzers were either “defenseless” (inermem) or “untrained at arms” (armis inexercitatam) were incorrect. The Emperor Rudolf I hired mercenaries from that state, and these men participated in the siege of Besançon in 1289. The men from Schwyz were “accustomed to moving rapidly in the mountains,” and they dealt a decisive blow to the city defenders in an impressive feat of arms by “attacking down a mountain.” The men of Schwyz again showed this skill in maneuvering in steep terrain before the battle of Morgarten, and they also won that contest by an attack downhill. Rudolf was so impressed “that the king [Rudolf] awarded them [the Schwyzers] a red banner of the Holy Roman Empire; that is all the emblems ... of the holy martyrs of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This was a red banner with a white Christian symbol on it, which

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14 The quotes are from Peter von Zittau and Johann von Victring respectively as cited in Liebenau, “Berichte,” pp. 23 and 24.


16 “daz inen der köng gab an ir roten paner daz heilich rich, daz ist alle waffen ... der heiligen marter unseres herren jesu Christi,” Justinger, Berner-Chronik, p. 46.
the Schwyzers carried at Morgarten, and red and white later became the colors of the entire Swiss Nation.\footnote{For an extensive work on Swiss flags see, A. and B. Bruckner, eds. Schweizer Fahnenuhr, (St. Gallen: Zollikofer, 1942).}

The attacks by the Schwyzers on the monastery of Einsiedeln further demonstrated their martial abilities shortly before the battle of Morgarten. A controversy over control of the monastery at Einsiedeln led to increased tensions between the Habsburgs and Schwyz because that noble family provided protection for the convent. In a "boundary dispute" (\textit{Marchenstreit}), Schwyz and Einsiedeln had contested the ownership of important lands since the tenth century, and the controversy was only solved in 1394 when Schwyz achieved formal control of the religious community. The people of Schwyz believed that much of the wealth of Einsiedeln belonged to them, which justified taking the monastery's goods.\footnote{Andreas Rügenbach, \textit{Der Marchenstreit zwischen Schwyz und Einsiedeln und die Entstehung der Eidgenossenschaft} (Zürich: Fretz und Wasmuth, 1965).}

In 1307, the Schwyzers launched a series of assaults on the cloister, and the official list of complaints (\textit{Klagerodel}) about these raids, written by the monks in 1311, gave insights into how the men of Schwyz waged war. The men of Schwyz broke into stalls and plundered storage facilities taking food, horses, and cattle, and they also killed a few monks while abusing others. Even though the attackers assaulted largely defenseless friars, the Schwyzers deployed their forces with careful military efficiency, and they almost always came at night meaning they were able to march and deploy after dark. Of the thirty attacks listed, five involved 100 men, two included 200 men, and six contained 300 men. The men were under military leadership and came with banners flying. Two officers were often over each group of 100, and the overall
leader of the state (*Landammann*) was frequently in charge of the raids. These numbers indicated the Schwyzers used tactical units of 100 men, but they also deployed smaller groups because the monks observed detachments of 20 and 30 men on one occasion. These smaller formations indicated a greater tactical flexibility because units of 100 were probably more cumbersome to deploy under various circumstances.\(^{19}\)

Rudolf von Radegg, a monk at Einsiedeln, witnessed one of the most significant raids on the monastery on the night of 6 and 7 January 1314 and wrote an account of it. The men of Schwyz marched from their homes for hours on a route that took them past the mountain of Morgarten in the dark and cold of the winter night. This force included some men on horseback and was the entire military strength of the state. The men of Schwyz attacked at midnight and showed great military efficiency. They divided their forces and surrounded the religious community, making sure that no one could escape, and advanced simultaneously to seize the monastery. The Schwyzers took much that was valuable, including books and cattle, and burned every document they could find, obviously hoping to destroy anything that might support the monks’ claims to ownership of the land. Foreseeing this possibility, the abbot had hidden the most important manuscripts before the Schwyzers attacked, and these significant items survived. The troops took nine monks captive to Schwyz including Rudolf where they remained under the hospitality of a local priest until the Habsburgs negotiated their release eleven weeks later.\(^{20}\) These prisoners were noblemen, and they were probably freed on the payment of a ransom.

While attacking defenseless monks required little military skill, these actions provide valuable insights into the ability of the men of Schwyz to deploy before the battle of Morgarten. The route from Schwyz to Einsiedeln led past the road going to Zug along the base of the Morgarten mountain. As was the case in 1315 when the troops deployed for the battle, it would have been easy for the Schwyzers to turn onto the road to Zug, follow it a short distance, and take positions on the slopes of the hill. Equally significant, the men of Schwyz had shown they were skilled at coordinated efforts at night and in cold weather, which were essential abilities in their victory at Morgarten.

The attacks on Einsiedeln were clearly provocative to the Habsburgs, and this aggressiveness was part of Schwyz’s foreign policy that led to war. The Schwyzers had also become more hostile to Einsiedeln because the

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attempts at arbitration had gone against them. Finally, Gerhard von Bevar (ruled 1307–18), the Bishop of Constance, placed the interdict on Schwyz for its belligerence and for its refusal to pay compensation for damages. But Church sanctions changed little politically, and the people of that state were so outraged by the ban that the bishop’s emissaries dared not read the official statement in Schwyz for fear of violence.21

The Schwyzers also prepared for hostilities by building border defenses. Uri’s location between the other two Forest States left it largely invulnerable to direct assault, but Schwyz and Unterwalden were subject to invasion. The mountainous terrain restricted the avenue of approach to these two states, and their people secured various routes of possible attack by building border fortifications “walls and trenches” called Letzi, from letze (border defense).22

The Schwyzers built these defenses shortly before the battle. Most likely, these people constructed the Letzi at Rothenthurm in 1310 to protect the route from Einsiedeln. Rudolf von Radegg mentioned the wall at Rothenthurm when he was taken captive to Schwyz in 1314. “We came to the place where the defensive walls had been constructed.”23 The fortifications there included a wall approximately 1 meter (3 feet) thick and 3 to 5 meters (10 to 16 feet) high. The barrier was about 400 to 450 meters (440 to 500 yards), and it also supported two towers.24 The Schwyzers build the defenses at Brunnen near the same time because they were in place in 1315 before the battle. These barriers protected against potential attacks by land and by boat across Lake Luzern and included palisades, which were poles driven into the shores of the lake to block landings by water. The walls on land were also about 10 to 16 feet (3 to 5 meters) high and 3 feet (1 meter) wide.25

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21Sidler, pp. 62, 115.
The defenses at Arth were among the most extensive. In 1314, the Schwyzers built two lines of defenses, in the lower part of the village (Niederdorf), in and near Lake Zug to defend against any attacks by land or water. They constructed palisades in the shores of the lake that were roughly 1000 meters (1100 yards) in length, and the walls on land were probably 2.5 kilometers (1.5 miles) long.\textsuperscript{26} The barriers on land were described as being about 12 feet high (12 Schuhe hoch) and 3 feet thick (3 Schuhe dick). They were well constructed out of stone and resembled the wall of a castle, complete with a trench, 9 meters (30 feet) wide and 2 meters (6 feet) deep, dug along the front of the position to enhance its effectiveness. The tops of the walls were irregular in configuration and included merlons, which were solid positions for protection, and crenellations, that were the empty spaces between the merlons from which shots could be fired. At either end of these barricades, the natural obstacle of dense forests helped protect this position from flank attack. Believing in defense in depth, the Schwyzers also constructed another line of obstacles in the upper village (Oberdorf) of Arth at the same time.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{26} Map facing page 125 in Sidler and Bürgi, "Die Letzinen der Urkantone," p. 43.
\textsuperscript{27} Bürgi, pp. 39–48.
The people of Unterwalden also built defensive positions at this time, mostly to protect them from attack across Lake Luzern. They constructed the extensive palisades and walls defending Stansstad, Buochs, and Beckenried about 1315, all on the shores of the lake. These extensive fortifications constructed shortly before the battle of Morgarten demonstrated that the people of Schwyz and Unterwalden, which were poor countries with small populations, made significant sacrifices in funds and effort to protect their lands from attack. Despite these impressive endeavors, the Schwyzers either overlooked an important avenue of approach or simply had too few resources to buttress it because they had failed to fortify the road leading from Lake Aegeri (Ägerisee) past the Morgarten Mountain into Schwyz. This oversight gave the Habsburg army a relatively unobstructed avenue of attack in 1315. The Schwyzers fortified this point of entrance at Hauptsee in 1322 seven years after the battle.

The military ability of the Forest States was related to their manpower because strength was partially a function of the number of men available for service. The population of these states at that time cannot be determined precisely, but each likely contained several thousand persons at most. Certainly, no more than one quarter of the total population was an adult, physically-fit male, and a reasonable estimate of the troop strength of Schwyz, was 1200 to 1500 men. Military service began at age sixteen and continued until the infirmities of old age precluded martial activities, usually by age sixty. Sixteen was also the age at which young men were legally adults. The men of the Forest States had no uniforms at this time, and they wore their usual peasant’s clothing on campaigns. But they had white crosses sewn into their clothing, either the shirt or the pants or both, to distinguish them from their enemies.

There were hardly any social distinctions between the men in the army of Schwyz because the community was comprised almost entirely of peasants, and few if any knights participated in the battle on their side. In his account of the battle, Justinger referred to groups of men he called ächter and einunger who fought for Schwyz. Some historians have assumed he meant men who were shock troops they called “banished” (Verbannten), who led the Schwyzers into battle. These men were supposedly “criminals” (Verbrecher) or “convicts” (Sträflinge). This interpretation is an error derived from a misunderstanding of the terms ächter and einunger in

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30 Oechsli, p. 230. All men of Schwyz aged “sixteen years and above” (mansnamen xvi yar alt und darob was) served indicating this was the age of military obligation. Hans Fründ, Die Chronik des Hans Fründ, Landschreiber zu Schwytz Christian Immanuel Kind ed. (Chur: Gengel, 1875), p. 48.
Justinger’s account, which seemed to refer to some kind of lawbreaker. In fact, those terms indicated these men were not criminals but were the best, bravest, and most experienced troops available. No doubt, such skillful warriors were placed in the most critical point in the battle.

The principal weapon wielded by the men of the Forest States was the halberd, a variation of the battle ax, that had an iron ax blade with a sharp point on it. Often there was also a hook on the side opposite to the ax blade. This metal accessory was attached to a wooden shaft 5 to 8 feet long, and the weapon was light, versatile, and relatively inexpensive. The device was used for stabbing and slashing, and, when the hook was available, it could snag a knight’s armor and be used to pull him from his mount. Once on the ground, a heavily armored cavalryman was out of his element and at a disadvantage. Johannes von Winterthur wrote that the Schwyzers had these “very terrible” weapons with which they could cut up their heavily-armed enemies into pieces as though “with a razor.” The Schwyzers also wore shoes with iron spikes affixed to them that made walking on the steep and slippery slopes of mountains much easier giving them a considerable advantage over their enemies on foot and horseback who had no such devices.

Some of the Swiss carried other weapons including daggers, but few if any had crossbows or other arms that could shoot projectiles, yet they often opened battle by throwing stones allowing them to do damage at a distance. The Habsburg knights on horseback and the foot soldiers who accompanied them wielded the typical weapons used by well-equipped armies at that time including swords, spears, and daggers. They also had defensive armament such as helmets, shields, and chain mail pants and shirts. The Habsburg army was clearly formidable, and its soldiers were “the strongest, best chosen, most battle experienced, most skillful, and most fearless [men].”

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31Justinger, p. 47.
34Ibid, p. 72. “Instrumentis pedicis et ferreis induit quibus faciliter gressum vel gradum in terra fixerat in montibus quantumcumque proclivis; inimicos et inimicorum equis minime pedes suos sistere valentibus.”
36Johannes von Winterthur, p. 71, “miliam robustissimam et electissimam et ad pungnandum peritissimam et intrepidissimam.”
The conflict between the Forest States and the Habsburgs became part of a war for the throne of Germany. In 1313, the Emperor Henry VII died, and ambitious and powerful nobles soon vied for his position. Louis IV of Bavaria (Ludwig the Bavarian) won this contest and was elected to the throne in October 1314, but the Habsburg faction, led by Frederick I, the Handsome (der Schöne), disputed the election, and civil war ensued. Frederick’s younger brother, Leopold, supported his sibling’s candidacy, while the Forest States sought to weaken Habsburg influence by sustaining Louis. The campaigning between Louis and Frederick in 1315 was
indecisive, but late in the year Leopold decided to invade the Forest States. The supporters of Louis had already slowed their activities as winter approached, but there was still time for Leopold to wage a rapid campaign before the onset of harsh weather. A quick, decisive expedition against the Swiss would remove the threat from the Forest States, and the subsequent plundering of their lands would provide needed supplies and funds to help sustain the Habsburg war effort. In fact as Duke Leopold's army advanced, his men carried "ropes and cords" (restes et funes) with which to lead away captured cattle.

Frederick and Leopold led a large army in the summer of 1315 believed to be 20,000 men on foot and 1300 well-armed knights on horseback. As allies of the Habsburg faction, contingents of men from Zurich, Luzern, Zug, and Glarus accompanied them. Victory seemed assured for Duke Leopold, if he could bring his impressive force to bear on the relatively small number of Swiss troops. The best hope the Swiss states had for success was to defeat the Habsburg army before it could be fully deployed against them.

Leopold divided his forces for a two-pronged attack on the Forest States from opposite directions. Count Otto von Strassberg led one of these advances, and he assembled his force at Interlaken to strike at Unterwalden from the southwest over the Brunig Pass. On the same day, 15 November 1315, the Duke led another army to invade Schwyz from the north. Striking at the Forest States from two directions at the same time seemed to be a good strategy because the Swiss would have difficulty meeting such threats, but the Swiss enjoyed interior lines of communication, which meant they could concentrate their forces on one army, and, if victorious, turn their attention to the other. The size of the force the Duke led against Schwyz was probably half the number of the two armies, and it included roughly 9,000 men on foot and on horseback. Among these were about 2000 mounted knights.

Fortunately, the badly-outnumbered Schwyzers received reinforcements from their allies. Uri faced no immediate danger, since the enemy marched only directly on Unterwalden and Schwyz, so Uri sent troops to the other states. Unterwalden sent men to aid Schwyz as well, even though an army also advanced on them, believing the defense of Schwyz was critical. The

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38 Johannes von Winterthur, p. 71.
39 ibid. pp. 70-1. "circa mille trecentos equites galeatos vel ultra et circa XX milia peditum."
40 Justinger, p. 47.
contingents sent to Schwyz numbered 600, and these additional forces played a key role in the battle. The combined Swiss forces reportedly numbered 2000 men.\textsuperscript{42}

Conrad Justinger told a quaint story about Leopold’s plans that illuminated a potential problem with them. A court jester or fool (narre), later believed to be Kuony (Kuoni) von Stocken, accompanied the army, and Leopold asked how the plans pleased him. He answered, “not well.” When asked to explain, the jester responded, “because everyone has counseled on how you will go into the land, [but] no one has explained how you will return.”\textsuperscript{43} This story was probably apocryphal, but it indicated a

\textsuperscript{42} Justinger, p. 47 and Peter von Zittau “\textit{fere duo millia pugnantium},” as cited in Liebenau, p. 23.

\textsuperscript{43} Justinger, p. 47, “\textit{Nu waz ein narre in dem here, der wart gefraget wie im der rat geviele? Do sprach er, nit wol; do fragten si in: warumb im ir rate übel geviele? Do antwurt er und sprach: darumb daz ir alle geraten hand, wie ir in daz lant komen, es hat üwer keiner
potential weakness in the Duke’s plans because no one considered the possibility of failure and the potential need to escape.

The Swiss planned to ambush the Habsburg army when it advanced, but a knowledge of when and where these forces would march was critical to that attempt. When Leopold assembled his troops at Zug on 14 November 1315, he had only two logical directions of approach into Schwyz. He could either advance along the shores of Lake Zug to attack the defenses at Arth, or he could march past Lake Aegeri and use the unobstructed road that went along the slopes of the Morgarten Mountain. Clearly, the route past Morgarten was the easiest means of approach, and the Schwyzers may have failed to fortify that area hoping to lure any attacking army into using that avenue of march, but they had to be completely sure it was used. The early historians of the battle have suggested that an intermediary or a traitor gave the Swiss this vital information. Johannes von Winterthur mentioned that the “count of Toggenburg” (de Toggenburg comitem), identified as Friedrich von Toggenburg, was a mediator between Schwyz and Leopold in negotiations to reach some kind of agreement. This effort failed, but during the mediation, the Schwyzers learned by which direction the Habsburg army would advance.\textsuperscript{44} Conrad Justinger stated that a nobleman named “von Hünenberg” shot an arrow over the fortifications towards the Swiss with a note attached to it which read, “defend yourselves at Morgarten.”\textsuperscript{45} This man, Hartman von Hünenberg, reportedly held the people of Schwyz in high esteem.

These stories seemed plausible, but they remained uncertain, and other explanations were also possible. Clearly, many men knew the route of march, and Leopold’s army may have been unable to keep a secret, meaning that the intelligence might have leaked out by numerous sources. The Schwyzers also used reconnaissance to discern their enemy’s movements. A man on horseback could cover many miles in a few hours, rapidly bringing vital information on the activities of the Habsburg army. As one chronicler asserted, the men of Schwyz learned of the enemy’s approach by “diligent scouting.”\textsuperscript{46} These scouts encamped on the road that led past the Morgarten mountain, and “watched it [the passage] all day and night.”\textsuperscript{47} The people of Schwyz established a ruse at Arth to fool Leopold into believing

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\textsuperscript{44}Johannes von Winterthur, p. 72. “Prescientes autem Switenses, per revelacionem comitis memorati, se in illa parte aggendeindos.”
\textsuperscript{45}Justinger, p. 47. “hütend Центр am morgarten.”
\textsuperscript{46}Sebastian Seeman as cited in Liebenau, p. 42. “Speculatorium industria (qui tum forte ei in loco peccorum armenta a bestiarum raptu tuebantur) premoniti, in loco memorato Morgarte ei occurrerunt.”
\textsuperscript{47}Johannes von Winterthur, p. 72. “Et erant custodientes ea tota die et nocte.”
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that their main forces were stationed at that fortified town. The people lit watch fires on the walls of Arth, and young boys and women remained on the barricades to give the impression that the walls were defended by men.\textsuperscript{48}

While the battle plans of Schwyz proved highly effective, the names of the leaders who made them remain unknown. Konrad von Yberg of Schwyz led at least two of the attacks on the monastery of Einsiedeln, and Werner Stauffacher was the leader of the state (Landammann) in 1314, but the commanders for 1315, when the battle took place, were unrecorded. However, Stauffacher most likely led the men of Schwyz at Morgarten. The overall leader of Uri for 1315 was Werner von Attinghusen (Attinghausen) and the leaders of Unterwalden that year were Heinrich von Zubon (Zuben) and Klaus von Wizerlon (Wißerlon).\textsuperscript{49}

The Habsburg cavalry advanced ahead of the foot soldiers. The mounted knights were clearly the most formidable part of the army, and the impressive throw weight of a heavily armored man charging on horseback was well known. The knights also had great disdain for the lower classes on foot. These nobleman likely believed they had a score to settle with the upstart peasants living in Schwyz, who had long resisted Habsburg domination. The road was probably only wide enough to accommodate two horses abreast, and the column of men on horseback could have stretched a few miles along the road. The men on foot followed the advancing cavalry, and this procession probably stretched for several miles as well. Additionally, some of the troops came by boat across Lake Aegeri. One vessel from Aarow (Aarau) held forty-five men.\textsuperscript{50} The men of Schwyz and their allies wisely directed their attack at the knights at the front of the column. While the entire Habsburg army greatly outnumbered the Swiss, at the point of engagement, the numbers involved on both sides were probably about equal. Also, the attack on a mountain road meant that the knights were incapable of mounting a charge, meaning they had lost their main advantage in combat.

The Habsburg army marched on Schwyz early in the morning of 15 Nov. 1315, and its progress was aided by the light of the moon that was only two days past full, but the brightness of the night also assisted the Swiss when they deployed to meet their adversaries. Leopold’s advance was orderly and well planned despite one serious oversight. Apparently, he made no effort to reconnoiter the line of march to learn if there were any

\textsuperscript{48}Peter Villiger as cited in Oechsli, p. 217*. “Allso hand sy von stundt an sich im ganzen land versamlet, sind den nächsten gegen den Morgarten gezogen und zu Arth die frowen lassen die wacht halten.” See also, Rennward Cysat as cited in Liebenau, p. 72.
\textsuperscript{49}See “Klagerodel,” Der Geschichtsfreund, 349–59 and letters to the leaders of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden as cited in Oechsli, pp. 197*–198* and pp. 203*–204*.
\textsuperscript{50}Sprenger und Klingenberg as cited in Oechsli, pp. 215–6*. 
unforeseen obstacles on the avenue of approach. Perhaps in his overconfidence and arrogance, he thought this routine military precaution was unnecessary. Even a few men on horseback could have brought Leopold vital information that he was marching into an ambush, and the Duke soon learned a hard lesson about the grave risks of underestimating the Swiss.

The Schwyers and their allies deployed on the uphill side of the road, which led past the Morgarten Mountain. These forces were spread out along this route, so they could strike a large section of the approaching column simultaneously. The Habsburg army marched along this road in the predawn light of morning, when the Swiss struck. In one of the earliest accounts of the action, the attackers, having allowed the Duke to advance into a trap, immediately “sprang forward from the mountain just like mountain goats, throwing stones, killing most [of the defenders], who were in no way able to defend [themselves] or to escape.”

The tactic of throwing stones at the beginning of an attack was often used by the Swiss early in their history, which was the case later, in 1339 at the Battle of Laupen. The stratagem of hurling stones was a crude form of fighting because the accuracy of thrown rocks was poor, and this tactic could only be used at very close range. Likely, stones were used by the Swiss who had few weapons cable of killing at a distance such as crossbows. The rocks thrown at Morgarten could have helped confuse the enemy and might have done some damage, but this barrage of stones was of short duration, and the Swiss soon advanced to meet their adversaries.

The Swiss attacked rapidly on the slippery slopes using their iron footgear for traction, but the Habsburg forces were caught completely out of their element, and the initial attack swept through the knights so rapidly that they were unable to give any effective resistance. The Swiss advanced courageously from their hiding places and enclosed their enemies “just as fish in a net and killed them without resistance [being offered].” The observation that the Habsburg forces were ensnared in groups helps clarify how the Schwyzers and their allies fought the battle. Clearly, the Swiss enjoyed some tactical flexibility in their units of 100, 200, and 300 troops, and they may have used these sections to mass men at critical junctures to dissect Leopold’s column. Once the line of knights was broken into

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51 Johann von Vittring as cited in Liebenau, p. 24. “Duci introitum concesserunt ... et quasi ibices de montibus scandentes labides miserunt, plurimos occiderunt, qui se defendere neque evadereullo modo potuerunt.” The account dates from 1340.
52 Justinger, p. 89.
53 Johannes von Winterthur, p. 72. “Animati et valde cordati contra eos descendunt de latibulis suis et eos quasi pisces in sagena conclusos invadunt et sine omni resistencia occidunt.”
sections, the Swiss easily surrounded these groups and destroyed them. These tactics made sense because they allowed the Swiss to keep in close proximity to each other, preserve unit cohesion, and maintain the ability to deploy for further action. If the Schwyzers and their allies were simply spread along the slopes, then the ability to redirect their activities would have been lost once the initial onrush had been made.

The Swiss used their halberds to cut down the knights, and they "slew both lords and horses." As platforms from which the cavalrmen could fight, the mounts were also military targets. The Swiss so rapidly cut down their enemies that Johannes von Winterthur stated, "It was not a battle but only ... a butchery." Duke Leopold's men were just like "sacrificial animals brought to slaughter." The Swiss spared no one, took no prisoners, and cut down their enemies "without [class] distinction" (indifferent). Social divisions were often significant on the battlefields of Europe in this era because many of the knights were wealthy, and these men were often taken captive and held for ransom. In something like a gentleman's agreement,

54Hans Gloggner's Zürcher Chronik as cited in Liebenau, p. 34. "Da waren switzer uf dem berg und sluogen herren und ross."
55Johannes von Winterthur, p. 73. "Non erat pungna se tantum ... quasi mactatio."
the upper classes were willing to take prisoners of their social equals hoping for the same treatment in return. This meant that combat was less dangerous for them than the men from the lower classes. By killing these knights without consideration of status or wealth, the Swiss made a social as well as a military statement.

The Schwyzers and their allies directed the initial attack against the knights, the most-feared adversaries, but they also struck the men on foot. Pressing their advantage, the Swiss rolled up much of the Habsburg column by attacking down the line of marching men. Possibly, the Swiss also attacked the enemy infantry near the lake at the same time they overwhelmed the cavalry. Leopold’s foot soldiers soon panicked, lost unit cohesion, and any semblance of resistance rapidly crumbled. Another factor in the loss of discipline among the infantry was the flight of the knights. When the Swiss attacked the nobles, many of these men turned to run away and trampled their own men killing many of them. “When the servants of the Duke saw [the attack] they all turned back and fled from there. And the first one to flee was Count Hainrich [Heinrich] von Montfort, the canon, who killed many [of the Duke’s] men [on foot] with [his] horses.” Only the contingent of fifty men from Zurich made the mistake of attempting to hold their position because they “did not want to flee” (woltend nit fliehen), but their courage was misspent, and they were all killed in the onrush. Their bodies lay close together (by einandren) or were piled upon each other. The foot soldiers at the front of the column suffered the heaviest casualties, and more men farther back survived. Only one man from the town of Winterthur died because he got separated from the other men and joined the nobles farther forward.

Desperate to save themselves from the onslaught of their adversaries, the men in the Habsburg army tried to escape by retreating back up the road. At times, the fleeing men were so pressed together in their panic that “they could neither defend themselves nor flee.” The attack pushed many men into the lake where they drowned being weighed down by clothing and armor. Others jumped into the lake attempting to swim to the opposite shore.

56Zürich Chronik (1428) as cited in Liebenau, p. 32. “Do das des hertzogen diener ersachent, do kartent si sich all umb, und fluchent dahin, und der erst der floch, der war graff Hainrich von Montfort, der corherr, der vil volks ertot mit den rossen.” See also Heinrich Brennwald and Aegidius (Gilg) Tschudi as cited in Liebenau, pp. 47, 63 respectively.
57Zürcher Chronik (1449) as cited in Liebenau, p. 35. See also, Gloggner as cited in Liebenau, p. 34. “Und verlurent die von zürich fünzig man.”
58Johannes von Winterthur, p. 73.
59Victring, as cited in Liebenau, p. 24. “Qui se defendere neque evadereullo modo potuerunt.”
and risked drowning rather than face the wrath of the Swiss. The water in November was very cold, and the lake was one mile (1.5 kilometers) or more across, so few survived. The forty-five men from Aarau, who came by boat, rushed to the vessel, but the craft sank under their weight, and they all drowned.

While escape was difficult, many survived including Duke Leopold, who evaded death because an aide saw an avenue of flight. “The Duke, himself having been informed by one who had observed a path [to use to] get away, escaped with difficulty.” Leopold was fortunate, but his casualties were heavy. In fact, “the flower of the army” (flos militie) had been killed. “From each community, castle, and town there were many men killed and because of that everywhere ... only the voice of crying and wailing was heard.” The names of over fifty prominent nobles who fell in the battle were recorded in the Swiss books of remembrance (Jahrzeitbücher), but there may have been many more. Friedrich von Toggenburg, who may have warned the Swiss of the approach of Leopold’s army, was among the dead. The total number killed in the Habsburg Army was roughly 2,000 men. Johannes von Winterthur stated that 1500 had been killed by the sword, but he added that this number did not include those who drowned. Mathias von Neuenburg also wrote that 1500 men had fallen, and Twinger von Königshofen stated that roughly 1500 knights and their attendants and 500 infantry were also killed.

In comparison, the Swiss losses were few. One erroneous source reported that the Schwyzers lost “no more than one man.” A careful modern study has stated that seven men from Schwyz lost their lives, while another seven men from the Uri and Unterwalden contingents were also killed. The victory for the Swiss at Morgarten was such a lopsided contest that it may be considered among the greatest achievements in the entire history of warfare.

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60 This is one of the best documented aspects of the battle see Justinger, p. 48, Johannes von Winterthur, p. 73, and accounts by Stuhlmann, the Zürcher Chronik, Gloggner, and the Berner Königshofen as cited in Liebenau, pp. 29, 33–4, 37 respectively.

61 Joachim von Watt (Vadian) as cited in Liebenau, p. 55.


63 Johannes von Winterthur, p. 73. “De singulis civitatis castellis et oppidis plures interempti fuerunt et ideo ubique ... sola vox fletus et ululatus audita est.”

64 The books of remembrance are found in Liebenau, pp. 81–5 and Oechsli, pp. 217*–19*. 

65 Johannes von Winterthur, Mathias von Neuenburg, and Twinger von Königshofen as cited in Liebenau, pp. 210*–11*. Twinger stated 150 gleves (anderhalp hundert glefen) or 1500 men had died.

66 “nit mer denn ain mann” Zürcher Chronik (1449) as cited in Liebenau, p. 35.

67 Sidler, p. 204.
As a young boy in school, Johannes von Winterthur saw “with my own eyes” (occulis meis conspexi) the men returning to Winterthur with some anxiety because he feared for the life of his father. Johannes finally saw his father, and, with great excitement, the boy ran to meet him in front of the city gate. The young scholar also saw Leopold return after the battle, and the Duke seemed understandably overcome with grief, worry, and exhaustion.68

While the battle of Morgarten destroyed one Habsburg army, the other invasion force continued to advance on Unterwalden. The men of Schwyz, and the contingent from Unterwalden that had fought at Morgarten, left the battlefield rapidly to deploy against the remaining menace, but this effort was unnecessary. Otto von Strassberg and his men had skirmished insignificantly with enemy forces, but, when the leader received a glove or gauntlet turned inside out, he knew that Leopold’s army had been defeated and immediately abandoned the campaign by withdrawing his troops.69 But Otto was among the casualties of these engagements. He suffered some kind of internal wound (lesus intrinsecus) and soon died.70

Once all threats of invasion had turned back, the Swiss returned to the battlefield to plunder the enemy dead, no doubt gaining considerable wealth in the process. The victors took weapons and armor from the fallen men and horses, and they also retrieved corpses from the lake to take anything of value from them. This effort was so thorough that few artifacts relating to the engagement have been found on the battlefield. Scores of important nobles had been killed, and their relatives retrieved many of these bodies to inter them in family vaults.71

Since the contest between the Swiss and the forces of Duke Leopold was only a part of a much wider conflict, the hostilities continued after Morgarten. However, the advantage had gone to the victors of the battle, and they soon went on the offensive striking late in 1315 and in the spring of 1316. The men of Unterwalden attacked Interlaken, and forces from Schwyz also struck at Glarus largely for plunder. The Swiss and the Habsburgs signed a series of armistices that ran from 1318 to 1323, which effectively brought the fighting between them to an end.72 Frederick von Habsburg’s bid for the throne of Germany ended at the battle of Mühldorf in 1322 when he was captured by his enemies. Among the conditions of his

68 Johannes von Winterthur, p. 73.
69 Justinger, p. 49. “Ouch wart dem grafen von Strasberg ein letzter hentschuch gesent von den herren die am morgarten entrunnen, davi er verstund, daz si am striit verloren hatten.”
70 Matthias von Neuenburg as cited in Liebenau, p. 28.
71 Johannes von Winterthur, pp. 73–4.
72 Sidler, pp. 216–9.
release in 1325 was the renunciation of Frederick’s claim to the office of Emperor.\textsuperscript{73}

On 9 Dec. 1315, only twenty-four days after the battle, representatives of the Forest States concluded a defensive alliance at Brunnen in the state of Schwyz. The “Brunnen Treaty” (Brunnen Vertrag) remains one of the most important agreements ever made among the Swiss. It bound the three states to cooperate on any military ventures, to come to one another’s aid in time of emergencies, to guarantee peace among the signers, and to assure cooperation on all matters dealing with foreign powers. Significantly, this accord would “remain eternally and continuously” (ewig und stete beliben) binding on the states, and it is still in force today.\textsuperscript{74} While the authenticity of the Federal Charter of 1291 may be in question, the Brunnen Treaty appears to be genuine. Although the existence of the Federal Charter was unknown until the eighteenth century, the Brunnen Treaty has been remembered since it was signed, and it may be the oldest authentic agreement of an “eternal” nature among the Swiss. The victory at Morgarten made the Brunnen Treaty possible, because the viability of cooperation among the Forest States had been clearly confirmed. The victors in the battle soon attracted the interest of other states nearby, and Luzern joined the alliance in 1332 followed by Zurich (1351), Zug and Glarus (both 1352), and Bern (1353). The Forest States and these new allies formed the “Eight Old States” (Acht Alten Orte), which became the configuration of the Swiss Confederation during most of the later Middle Ages. These states, held together by the Brunnen Treaty of 1315 and later alliances, maintained the viability of the Confederation allowing it eventually to evolve into the modern Swiss nation.

In a stunning feat of arms at Morgarten, the free Swiss peasants defeated a competent feudal army led by mounted knights in one of the most lopsided battles in history. This victory was among the first of its kind, and it signaled the development of infantries and the decline of cavalries in the armies of Europe. Over the next two centuries, the Swiss would continually demonstrate how free men could protect themselves and secure their privileges by their military prowess.

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\textsuperscript{73}Niederstätter, \textit{Die Herrschaft Österreich}, pp. 122–8.
\textsuperscript{74}Oechsli (1901), pp. 97–9.