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Original Publication Citation

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Winkler, Albert, "The Battle of Murten: The Invasion of Charles the Bold and the Survival of the Swiss States" (2010). All Faculty Publications. 1804.
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The Battle of Murten

The Invasion of Charles the Bold
and the Survival of the Swiss States

by Albert Winkler

Frequent warfare was a harsh political reality in central Europe in the late Middle Ages as ambitious states tried to extend their power and influence by attacking and subjugating other territories. As a result of this frequent aggression, success on the battlefield was necessary for the survival and independence of many nations and peoples, including the Swiss Confederation. The most critical threat to the existence of the Swiss alliance in the fifteenth century was the invasion in 1476 by Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, one of the most powerful rulers in Europe. In two stunning victories, Granson (Grandson in German), and, most importantly, Murten (Morat in French),¹ the Swiss assured the survival of the Confederation, and these impressive feats of arms also propelled the Swiss states to the status of major players in international affairs for a short time.²

This contest was also a contrast in ideologies because it pitted the monarchical and largely feudal duchy of Burgundy against the Swiss states that were predominately republics and democracies. In a broader sense, the victory of the Confederate foot soldiers contributed to a revolution

¹ Many of the places mentioned in this article are on the linguistic frontiers of Switzerland between the German and French-speaking areas, and most of them are known by the spelling in either language. In this paper, the locations in the French-speaking areas will be referred to by their French spelling and those in the German-speaking areas by their German spelling.

² A large collection of sources is Gottlieb Ochsenbein ed. Die Urkunden der Belagerung und Schlacht von Murten. Im Auftrage des Festkomites auf die vierte Säkularfeier am 22 Juni 1876, (Freiburg: Bielmann, 1876). Hereafter cited as O. This work fails to include a few important sources including Diebold Schilling, Die Berner-Chronik des Diebold Schilling, 1468-1484 2 vols. Gustav Tobler ed. (Bern: Wyss, 1897-1901). Hereafter cited as Schilling (Bern).
in military tactics that helped change the character of the battlefield for centuries to come. From that point, the armies of Europe relied more heavily on infantry formations than was the case earlier in European history, and the once-dominant cavalry became the auxiliary of men on foot. This article will discuss the character and actions of Charles the Bold and address the nature of his threat to Swiss independence. Additionally, this essay will deal with the Swiss military and how it defeated one of the most feared armies in Europe at the battle of Murten and also put in motion a major change in military tactics.3

Charles the Bold or Charles le Téméraire (1433-77), better translated as "Charles the Rash," ruled the Duchy of Burgundy from 1467 to 1477. As an ambitious man, Charles sought to expand his holdings and to create a strong, centralized state between France and the Holy Roman Empire.4 By 1474, he controlled Alsace and the Franche-Comté, and he enjoyed an alliance with Savoy, which dominated


much of the Vaud region that later became part of Switzerland.\textsuperscript{5} In the late fifteenth century, these areas were on or near the borders of the Swiss Confederation, and the Duke’s territorial ambitions clearly threatened the Swiss, making a clash between the two powers almost inevitable.

Charles often used brutality as a means of intimidating his enemies into submission, and the Duke earned a reputation for savagery. Contemporaries often called him, “Charles the Terrible.”\textsuperscript{6} King Louis XI of France held him in disdain with good reason, and he stated that Charles had little sense, was quick tempered, and conducted himself as a “beast” (\textit{bestia}).\textsuperscript{7} This was certainly true when the Duke destroyed entire regions of northern France in 1471 and burned 2,072 towns and villages in the process.\textsuperscript{8} Even if these numbers were exaggerated, this action was clearly extensive even by the brutal standards of warfare in that era. Charles said he ravaged and burned these areas, so they would cause him “no trouble for a long time.”\textsuperscript{9}

In a celebrated incident, the Duke subdued the city of Liège in 1467, and he took away virtually all the laws, rights, charters, and privileges of the community and its citizens.\textsuperscript{10} When Liège continued to resist his authority, Charles returned, took the town by assault on 30 Oct. 1468, and destroyed it. His men plundered all the houses, raped women,

\textsuperscript{5} R. J. Walsh, \textit{Charles the Bold and Italy (1467-1477): Politics and Personnel} (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005).
\textsuperscript{8} “Que par le raport du pruvost des marisal de /’ostel qui bailloit par escrit à mondit s. gr le duc toute les villes qu’on avoir arses, qu’on en ardy en some deux mille septante deus que villes que villages.” Jean de Haynin, \textit{Les Mémoires de Messire Jean Seigneur de Haynin et de Louvengier Chevalier 1465-1477} (Mons: Hoyois, 1842), p. 209. See also, Kirk, 2: 152.
\textsuperscript{9} “J’ay ards & brûlé tout le pays de Caus, par maniere qu’il ne nuira de long-temps, ny à vous ny à nous autres.” Charles the Bold “Lettre ... au Duc de Bretagne,” 1472 as cited in Philippe de Comines, \textit{Memoires} (Paris, Rollin, 1747) 2: 258. See also, Vaughan, p. 81.
tortured citizens, despoiled churches, murdered inhabitants, and burned the community to the ground. Charles then refused to allow the city to be rebuilt, and it remained uninhabited until after his death.\textsuperscript{11}

Nesle, a town in northeastern France, suffered a similar fate. After the Duke’s army took the position on 10 June 1472, his men went on a killing spree, massacring the town’s defenders. The troops only spared a few enemy archers from death after they had cut off each man’s right hand. When the Duke entered a church on horseback, the animal reportedly splashed through human blood on the floor, and Charles bragged about the brutality of his men stating he had “many good butchers” (\textit{moult bons bouchers}) in his army.\textsuperscript{12}

The Duke’s policy of harsh treatment of his enemies seemed to have some military and political advantages, because many of the cities near Liège chose to negotiate with him rather than resist and be destroyed. In the case of Liège, the city’s ability to assail him had been crushed, and the town’s inhabitants were unable to retaliate. Obviously, the Duke thought that brutality was a worthwhile practice, and he later used this policy against the Swiss but with disastrous results because they had the ability to strike back.

The Swiss Confederation grew from three small states at the turn of the thirteenth century to a coalition of eight mutually-dependent nations by 1352. These \textit{Acht Alten Orte} (eight old states) were the federation that dominated the Swiss regions for much of the later Middle Ages. By 1474 when the war with Charles began, the Confederation had developed into a complex system of alliances and subordinated areas to control much of modern-day Switzerland from Lake Constance in the northeast to lands beyond Lake Neuchatel in the west. The Duke’s war with the Swiss was an unwise venture from his standpoint. The Confederation was a poor area with few resources and limited wealth. In fact, the most important economic export of the Swiss was their mercenaries who had earned a well-deserved reputation as effective soldiers in many armies.


\textsuperscript{12} For the identical quotes, see Jean de Roye, \textit{Journal de Jean de Roye: connu le nom de Chronique Scandaleuse} (Paris: Renourd, 1844) 2: 268-70 and Comines, \textit{Memoires} 2: 94-5. See also, Kirk 2: 134-6 and Vaughan, pp. 77-80.
in Europe. This made a successful conquest of the Swiss doubtful, and such a victory would gain Charles few assets.13

The Swiss military system had matured by the middle of the fifteenth century to be among the most admired in Europe. The Confederates were primarily infantry, many wielding either the halberd or pike. Each was a simple and effective weapon. The halberd was a wood shaft five to seven feet in length with a spear point, hook, and ax blade affixed to it. The halberdiers used the hook to snag the armor of a knight, so he could be pulled from his mount, and they used the spear point for stabbing and the ax blade for slashing. The pike was a spear eighteen feet in length that was used to keep enemy cavalry at bay.14

By the middle of the fifteenth century, the Swiss had developed a square (Viereck) tactical formation known as the Haufen (mass, great number) which was designed to use the pike and halberd most effectively. The Confederates placed three rows of pikemen on each of the four sides of the structure where they could absorb the shock of attacking cavalry, the length of their weapons keeping the knights from penetrating the formation. The halberdiers were in the center of the Haufen and provided tactical flexibility because they could rush past the pikemen and engage an enemy in close combat. Men wielding an early musket, the harquebus, also stood behind the pikemen providing firepower for the formation. The Haufen was surprisingly mobile, and the Swiss often advanced over rough terrain while maintaining good order.15

Fear of the Duke's growing power brought many of the areas threatened by him together in agreements for mutual support and military aid. On 31 March 1474 the eight Swiss states joined an alliance, the Lower Union (Niedere Vereinigung), composed of bishops, dukes, and cities mostly in Alsace and Lorraine. Surprisingly, this agreement included the Archduke of Austria, Sigismund, who was a member of the Habsburg

13 The most comprehensive history of Switzerland in English remains, James Murray Luck, A History of Switzerland: The First 100,000 Years, Before the Beginnings to the Days of the Present (Palo Alto: Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, 1985).

14 The classic study of Swiss Medieval warfare is, Carl von Elgger, Kriegswesen und Kriegskunst der schweizerischen Eidgenossen im XIV., XV. und XVI. Jahrhundert (Luzern: Militärisches Verlagsbureau, 1873). For a discussion of weapons, see, pp. 91-4.

15 Elgger, Kriegswesen, pp. 273-314. The Haufen was not developed from the Greek Phalanx and any similarity between the two was coincidental.
family, the traditional enemy of the Swiss. In fact, the mutual fear of
Charles led the Confederates to finalize a treaty, the Eternal Direction
(Ewige Rightung) with the Habsburgs on 14 Oct. 1474.16

Soon after, the Executive Council (Tagsatzung) of the Swiss
Confederation, comprised of representatives from all eight states in the
Confederation, met in Luzern and formally declared war on Charles on 25
October 1474. The council wanted the Swiss to appear to be the wounded
party, and it listed the numerous incidents of maltreatment (misshandeln)
that Charles had perpetrated on the Confederates and their allies. The
declaration justified in advance any acts of war the Swiss would make on
the Duke and his holdings.17

The first major engagement of the war was the battle of Héricourt on
13 November 1474. A large army of 18,000 men, including 7,570 Swiss,
laid siege to the city of Héricourt in the Franche-Comte controlled by
Charles. When a Burgundian army of 12,000 men attempted to break the
encirclement, the Confederates and their allies drove off the attackers
easily. Reportedly, only two Swiss were wounded.18 The Burgundians
lost perhaps 3,000 men, and the Bernese counted 1,617 enemy dead. The
victory at Héricourt was an example of how the Swiss viewed the taking
of captives because Confederates were irritated by the fact that their allies
took 70 prisoners, since “it was their [the Swiss] custom to capture no
one.”19 But the Swiss also showed mercy to their adversaries. Héricourt
surrendered after three days of bombardment, and the Swiss allowed the
garrison of 450 men to leave unmolested and with their possessions.20

Bern had long had a policy of territorial expansion, and the outbreak
of hostilities with the Burgundians gave that state and its allies the excuse
to invade the neighboring Vaud area which was controlled by Charles’s
ally, Savoy. In three major campaigns during the spring, summer, and fall
of 1475, contingents from Bern, Fribourg, Solothurn, and later Zurich
attacked the communities and fortresses of the area eventually taking 16

16 Adolf Gasser, “Ewige Richtung und Burgunder Kriege: zur Klärung einer
alten Streitfrage,” in Ausgewählte historische Schriften 1933-1983 (Basel: Helbing,
17 Schilling (Bern), Berner-Chronik, 1: 174-5. See also Vaughan, pp. 293-4.
18 Heinrich Brennwald, Schweizerchronik, Rudlof Luginbühl ed. 2 vols. (Basel:
19 “Dann ir gewonheit is, das si niemand ufnemen.” Schilling (Bern), 1: 184.
20 Ibid., 180-5.
towns and 43 castles. Typical of the warfare of the era, the raids involved taking plunder and wanton destruction.

When the Swiss invaded the Vaud, they demanded the surrender of opposing garrisons. If the defenders surrendered with little or no resistance, they were treated well, but if they put up an impressive fight, the Swiss often treated them harshly. When the Bernese took the town and castle of Granson late in April 1475, they captured a ship full of people trying to escape on Lake Neuchatel and let them go unharmed. The citizens of the town soon surrendered, and the men of Bern let them leave uninjured and carrying their possessions. In October 1475, the citizens of Murten refused entry to the forces of Bern and Fribourg. The besiegers warned the people of the town that if they took the position by assault, they would protect neither the lives nor the property of the defenders. The town soon surrendered, and the Bernese and Fribourgers spared the people and their possessions. On the other hand, when the Bernese took the castle of Grammont in the Franche-Comté by assault in late August 1475, they killed all its defenders except a few men who dressed as women in a futile attempt to escape detection.

The war became more cruel by the fall of 1475, and the incidents of brutality were more common on both sides. When the Burgundians took the fortress of Briey in the France-Comté in

City Walls of Murten.

23 Schilling (Bern), 1: 290-1. "... und tet man nieman weder an libe noch an g't nit."
24 Ibid, pp. 264-5.
September 1475, they captured the Swiss who had withstood a cannonade for three days. When the Swiss capitulated, they gave the besiegers 12,000 Gulden, a huge sum, to save their lives. The Burgundians took the money and assured the garrison they would be spared, but Charles ordered them hanged. The Duke vowed, "Thus will I do [the same] to all Swiss who live where I want to enter." Clearly, Charles would honor no deal to save men's lives if they had offered resistance, and he set a brutal policy of how he would deal with the Swiss.

When the men of Bern and Fribourg destroyed Estavayer in October of 1475, part of their motivation might have been retaliation for the executions at Briey. After a lengthy, difficult, and costly attack, the Bernese and Fribourgers broke into the fortified town of Estavayer and killed any man whom they thought had participated in the defense of the fortress. The reports which stated that the Swiss killed 1,000 to 1,300 residents were much exaggerated because the town was too small to have so many citizens in it, but the number of deaths was doubtless high. Some defenders of the town fled to the Chenaux Castle in an attempt to save their lives, but the Swiss stormed the fortress and killed its defenders, only sparing a few young boys and one nobleman.

Even by the brutal standards of the day, the conduct of the men from Bern and Fribourg in Estavayer was unacceptable. The leaders in Bern, expressing fear that God and the Saints might be moved to take revenge against them, soon wrote a strong denunciation of the acts of "inhuman severity" (unmenschliche Härtingkeiten) of their troops. When the dead bodies were brought into the churches, there was a "great lamentation of women and children whose husbands and fathers had been killed." The

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25 Brennwald, Schweizerchronik 2: 240-1, mentioned no resistance and no ransom and stated 300 Swiss were hanged. Others stated 80 Germans were killed likely not noting the difference between Swiss and Germans. Heinrich Witte, "Lothringen und Burgund," Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für Lothringische Geschichte und Alterthumskunde, Metz, 2 (1890): 72-3 and Emmanuel von Rodt, Die Feldzüge Karl des Kühnen 2 vols. (Schaffhausen: Hurter,1843) 1: 380-1.


28 Bernische Anführer, "Klagende Ausdrüke," as cited in Rodt, 1: 531.
Swiss troops soon became disturbed by their own brutality, and many of them gave the bereaved women and children money to ease their losses.29

The attacks on the fortresses in the Vaud clearly threatened the Duke’s interests in the area, but a victory by the men of Valais, an ally of Bern, over troops from Savoy on 13 November 1475 was much more serious. This setback cut the essential supply lines through the St. Bernard Pass and over the Alps, which Charles badly needed because he depended on the reinforcements, supplies, and funds that reached him from Savoy by that route. After he took the city of Nancy on 30 November 1475, which ended his campaign in Alsace, he turned his attention to the Swiss and reopening the pass.30 The Duke rashly launched an offensive in the challenging conditions of winter rather than wait for warmer weather in the spring.

Bern was Charles the Bold’s major target for the initial phases of the campaign. This state had been among the most aggressive against him, and Bern’s defeat could bring the rest of the Duke’s adversaries to terms. Charles marched on Bern from the west and seized important fortresses as he advanced. Taking these positions kept his supply lines open, and it also kept any garrison from striking the rear of his forces. His army was considered very large and numbered about 20,000 men.31 It was very formidable and included the much-feared and heavy-armored Burgundian cavalry which could smash effectively into an enemy’s columns. Charles also had a large advantage in artillery which could reduce fortifications and also cut down enemy troops.

The major weakness in the Burgundian army was its multi-ethnic character. Charles hired mercenaries from various nations including English archers, Italian cavalrymen, and German troops wielding harquebuses. These contingents could be very effective, but they lacked cohesion with other units, and their different languages caused communication problems.32 In comparison, the Swiss had many advantages. While the

29 Schilling (Bern), 1: 297. “gros iomer von frowen und kinden, denen ir manne und väter erslagen waren.”
30 Jeune Huguenin, Histoire de la Guerre de Lorraine et du Siège de Nancy, par Charles le Téméraire duc de Bourgogne 1473-1477 (Metz, Troubat, 1837).
31 Schilling (Bern), 1: 354, note 1. G. Tobler quotes from letters of 13 and 17 Feb. 1476. The contemporary estimates of 40 to 60,000 men were much exaggerated.
Confederates had few cannon and little cavalry, their infantry was highly effective, and their troops were similar in language and culture. They were campaigning near their homelands, so they knew the terrain well, and they had the additional motivation of defending their homes from foreign invasion.

The Duke marched his forces to the castle of Granson, and he laid siege to the fortress, his artillery pounding the position day and night. More than five hundred men from Bern and Fribourg defended Granson, and they successfully withstood attempts to storm their position on 18 and 21 February 1476. The resistance “horrified” (entsetzt) Charles and left him eager for revenge. The Swiss began to lose courage when a cannon shot blew the head off their “master of cannon” (bächsenmeister), and when much of their powder exploded. Their position was rapidly becoming untenable, and, most significantly, they had no knowledge that their Swiss compatriots were assembling a large army at Murten to come to their aid.33

In despair, the troops in the fortress negotiated a surrender, even though the Duke had a reputation for executing those who resisted him. All the contemporary Swiss sources stated that Charles offered these men their lives when they capitulated, but Panigarola, an Italian emissary with the Duke, stated that no such assurance was given, and the men in Granson placed themselves at the mercy of Charles. If so, it was a grievous mistake because the Duke ordered their immediate execution. On 28 Feb. 1476, the day of the surrender, 412 Swiss troops were led past Charles’s tent as he watched and were hanged on walnut trees in a scene which Panigarola described as “shocking and horrible” and most certain to fill the Swiss with terror. The remainder of the men in the garrison were drowned in Lake Neuchatel on the following day, and the Duke again vowed to do the same to all the Swiss who fell into his hands.34

The Swiss army that assembled to relieve the garrison at Granson was a formidable force of 20,376 men. Its numbers were carefully recorded to assure that the plunder taken after the battle was evenly distributed.35 The army was divided into the traditional formations of three large squares (Haufen). Each was arrayed in the typical fashion with rows of pikemen on

33 Schilling (Bern), 1: 355-6.
the outside of the formation with men wielding halberds and harquebuses on the inside. This force advanced from Neuchatel and met Charles’s forces on 2 March 1476.36

The vanguard (Vorhut) of the Swiss army was relatively small and numbered only about 1,500 men, mostly from Fribourg, Schwyz, and Bern. The vanguard advanced more rapidly than the other, much larger formations, and engaged the enemy first. As the Burgundian forces approached, the pious Swiss realized that their lives would soon be in danger, so they knelt to pray, as was their custom before battle. When they did so, they held their “arms apart” (mit zertanen armen). The opposing knights misunderstood this gesture as a sign of submission, and these men rode forward shouting to the Swiss, “You will get no mercy; you must all die.”37

35 Amtliche Sammlung der ältern Eidgenössischen Abschiede, 8 vols. (Lucern: Werner, 1858-1874), 2: 593. See also Vaughan, p. 375.
The Battle of Murten

There was little planning on either side, and the two armies almost stumbled upon each other. The advanced Burgundian cavalry struck the Swiss vanguard, and brave knights threw themselves against the rows of pikemen to little effect. At the same time, the Duke's army began showering the Swiss with arrows and cannon shots inflicting many casualties. Reportedly, the bowmen had enhanced the lethality of their arrows by placing poison in the tips.\textsuperscript{38}

When Charles rode forward and saw the fighting, he made a logical but ultimately an unwise decision. His forces had the Swiss vanguard surrounded, and he attempted to reorder his men to make firing upon the Confederates more efficient rather than renewing the costly cavalry attacks. The Duke ordered some of his troops to withdraw on the flanks of his enemies, so more cannon could be brought to bear on them. When the Burgundian forces were pulling back, the main formation of Swiss troops came into view, and Charles's men became frightened and confused at the appearance of the unexpected forces. The withdrawal then turned to panic. Some men yelled, "Save yourselves if you can," and the entire army fled. Charles bravely rode among his men urging them to stay and fight, but he was unsuccessful, and he soon fled as well.\textsuperscript{39}

Losses on both sides were minor, and each suffered no more than a few hundred casualties, but the battle of Granson was still highly significant. The Swiss had defeated one of the most impressive armies in Europe and captured the Burgundian camp where they found much booty. These spoils included tents, furniture, supplies, relics, cups of silver and gold, large amounts of money, and artistic treasures such as intricate tapestries. The troops also found precious stones including "7 large diamonds and 7 large rubies." A significant piece of jewelry was an "exquisite diamond, whose great worth no one could measure, [being] half the size of a walnut, [and being] set in gold."\textsuperscript{40} Most importantly for military purposes, the Swiss captured 420 large cannon, 800 smaller cannon, hundreds of tons of gunpowder, thousands of horses, and many thousands of infantry weapons including battle axes, pikes, and bows and arrows.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{38} Schilling (Bern), 1: 377-81.
\textsuperscript{40} Schilling (Bern) 1: 384-8. This might have been the Sancy diamond, which was 53 carats in weight. See W. R. Cattelle \textit{The Diamond} (New York: Lane, 1911), pp. 78-9.
\textsuperscript{41} Florens Deuchler, \textit{Die Burgunderbeute} (Bern: Stämpfli, 1963).
When the Swiss found the bodies of 412 of their countrymen still hanging from the trees near Granson, they were filled with remorse and rage. An eyewitness described the scene:

“There one found sadly the honorable men still freshly hanged on the trees in front of the castle [of Granson] whom the tyrant [Charles the Bold] had hanged. That was a wretched, pitiable sight. There were hung ten or twenty men on one bough. The trees were bent down and were completely full. There hanged a father and son next to each other, there two brothers or other friends. And there came the honorable men who knew them; who were their friends, cousins, and brothers, who found them miserably hanging. There was at first anger and distress in crying and bewailing.”

The Bernese and Fribourgers felt the loss most intensely because it was largely their men who had been killed, but many other Swiss were deeply angered by the atrocity. Rather than break their will to oppose him, the Duke’s actions at Granson united the Swiss as never before in a common cause of resistance and revenge. The first to feel the wrath of the Confederates was a force of about thirty Burgundians who had fled to the castle of Granson. When the Bernese took the castle, they either hanged or threw twenty-eight men down from the castle towers. Only a few young boys and one nobleman were spared. The man was exchanged for a Swiss captive.

After the victory at Granson, the Swiss failed to pursue the Duke’s disorganized forces and eradicate them. Bern, who feared the return of the army, vainly tried to convince its allies to pursue their defeated enemy, and the Swiss contingents remained for only three or four more days before they returned home. Bern’s warning was correct, and the Duke soon made another attempt to invade the Swiss Confederation. Charles withdrew to Lausanne where he reorganized his forces for further action, showing much energy and resolve. He soon wrote to “all the world to come to him with all [its] cannon and all [its] manpower.” Charles ordered the city of Dijon to send all its artillery, and he had the

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43 Edlibach, *Chronik*, p. 151 and Schilling (Bern) 1: 382-3.
44 *Eidgenössischen Abschiede* 2: 582-6.
church bells and anything made of copper in his lands melted into cannon. He also ordered the city of Nancy and the duchy of Luxembourg to send him all their artillery, so he would have “sixty times more [guns], as he said, than he had lost.”

His allies, including Savoy, Milan, Venice, Aragon, and the pope, soon granted him funds, weapons, and men. For two months, the forces came to Charles’s camp from numerous areas including Italy, Germany, Flanders, Burgundy, England, and Poland. This army was nearly the size of the force Charles deployed at Granson, and it probably numbered from 19 to 22,000 men.

These troops soon showed much indiscipline and brutality, and there were one or two brawls among the men every day. In one riot, 125 men from Italy and Germany were killed. The soldiers killed many local people, and so thoroughly plundered and burned the area within twenty miles of their camp that they could no longer get supplies from the region and had to advance or withdraw. While Bern was the major objective of the campaign, Charles first attacked the fortress of Murten to remove any threat to his rear. On 27 May, the army began its slow march to Murten, roughly 45 miles away. The advance took 14 days, averaging only 3 miles a day, and the army arrived on 9 June to begin the siege.

The Duke’s attack on Murten was most unfortunate for him. The town was on the shores of Lake Murten, and Charles could not invest the position because he had no flotilla on the lake. Supplies and reinforcements reached the garrison in the fortress throughout the siege. Most importantly, besieging Murten meant that the Duke had to deploy his forces near the lake, some facing the town and some facing any Swiss advance. If his forces were dislodged, the logical line of retreat was directly into the lake. Napoleon Bonaparte visited Murten in 1797. He examined the battlefield and learned how the Duke had deployed his forces. The general was highly critical and stated, “Charles the Bold must have been a great madman!”

He explained, “If we ever offered


\[47\] Grosjean, Murtenschlacht, p. 50. Vaughan, p. 397 has less-convincingly argued that the Duke had no more “than 12 to 15,000 combatants.”


\[49\] Napoleon as cited in Antoine-Marie Chamaus LaValette, Memoirs of Count Lavalette: Adjutant and Private Secretary to Napoleon (London: Gibbings, 1894), p. 149.
BATTLE OF GRANSON,
March 2nd 1476.

- Swiss
- Burgundian Cavalry
- Cannon
- Infantry

Mount Aubert
Lake of Neuchatel

Granson

BATTLE OF MORAT
June 22nd 1476

A. Burgundian Entrenched Position, weakly held
B. The Duke and his Main Body coming up in disorder to occupy the Position
C. Blockading force South of Morat, Italian under Froideval
D. Spot where this force was driven into the Lake
E. Blockading force North of Morat, Savoyards under Raimond, with a separate Entrenchment before them
battle in this place, be persuaded that we would not use the lake as [an avenue] for retreat."

The renewed threat from Charles motivated the Executive Council of the Swiss Confederation to redefine its rules of war, which were first stated in the Sempach Letter (Sempacherbrief) of 1393. These laws included a prohibition of plundering until the conclusion of battle and then only with the permission of leaders, rules for the distribution of booty, a charge strictly forbidding the Swiss to fight among themselves, a statement that the Swiss wounded should be tended, and a strict admonition that no one should flee from battle. These orders protected churches, women, and children, but not men because they were potential combatants. On 18 March 1476, the Executive Council repeated many of the former stipulations, but it placed a new emphasis on conduct against adversaries. It ordered the troops, “so far as possible to kill our enemies” and stated that no prisoners be taken while a battle was still in progress. These rules gave the Swiss troops a legal justification for their brutal actions at the battle of Murten.

Murten was a fortified town with high walls, and the position could delay the Duke’s advance until the Swiss could assemble their troops for battle. The city council of Bern chose Adrian von Bubenberg, an experienced soldier, to lead the defenders of the stronghold, and he arrived with fifteen hundred Bernese troops on 9 April. The town had numerous weapons including many cannon and an ample supply of gun powder, and additional supplies reached the position across Lake Murten throughout the siege. Every man knew his duties, and Bubenberg allowed no dissent. If anyone complained or advocated surrender, he was to be killed to separate the cowardly from the courageous. The Bernese constructed entrenchments and bastions near the two gates of the town, and, in an impressive act of bravado, Bubenberg ordered these gates left open day and night during the entire siege forcing the garrison to be on constant alert for attack. Bubenberg also ordered his men to sally out to engage the besiegers of the town. This policy started

50 Kirk, 3: 429 in footnote. “Si jamais nous livrons bataille en ces lieux, soyez persuadé que nous ne prendrons pas le lac pour retraite.”
Adrian von Bubenberg enters Murten by Schilling (Bern).

when Charles's army first arrived at the fortress on 9 June, and 250 men of the garrison attacked the Duke’s troops killing 50 of them.  

During the siege, the Burgundians shot arrows into the fortress with notes attached warning of the consequences of resistance. “You peasants, surrender the city and castle... We will soon take the city, and will capture you, kill [you], hang [you] by the neck.” The Swiss knew they would be killed if they capitulated, and the Duke’s brutality had increased their willingness to resist. Charles never learned this fact, and he continued his remorseless practices. As described by Panigorola, who was with the Brugundians, “The Duke had all the villages in the area burned down... [and] the Duke hanged all the Swiss that he captured.”

The Burgundians were stationed two bowshots (about 400 to 500 yards) from the walls of the fortress but were still subject to heavy cannon fire day and night from the town’s artillery. Early in the siege, a Burgundian commander ordered his men “under the threat of death” to attack the fortress and be standing in front of the city gates by dawn. But that morning, the soldiers were still far from the walls because the

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55 “Ir buren, gebent die stat und slos uf ... wir kommen bald in die stat und werden úch vachen ertöten und an úwer gurglen henken.” Schilling (Bern) 2: 34.

heavy fire from the Bernese cannon had kept them away. The Duke’s men then began to dig entrenchments at night in a zigzag pattern that would allow the troops to move slowly towards the town walls as the trenches progressed.57

While the smaller guns of the Burgundians shelled Murten for days, the heaviest cannon (houptbüchsen) did the greatest damage when they arrived and were placed in use on 17 June. After the first four shots, a main tower in the walls around the fortress collapsed. The people of the town tried to rebuild their damaged fortifications at night, but the guns continued to wreck their defenses. On the next day, the garrison counted seventy cannon balls that had been fired into the town, and the guns soon knocked down the wall on one side of the fortress.58

Charles ordered an assault on Murten that evening, 18 June, to exploit the breach in the walls. The attackers advanced with great shouts, and they carried ladders and axes to help them storm the position, but the garrison had placed their guns at the most exposed sections of the walls and drove their enemies away. The Swiss “defended themselves very well,” and the Burgundians lost from 200 to 1,000 men.59 Bubenberg also stated that each man in the town had conducted himself in a courageous and obedient manner.60 But the garrison was still in grave danger, and the defenders sent a message to Bern on 19 June stating they were nearly in an exposed position, questioning their ability to hold out. If the artillery pounded down more towers and walls of the fortress, then the garrison would have only their bodies with which to defend the town.61 Clearly, Charles would take the position unless aid came in time.

In his obvious disdain for the lower classes, the Duke failed to appreciate how vigorously a nation comprised largely of free men

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57 Ibid.
58 Schilling (Bern), 2:37-8. They were “Damviller” and “Selenquin” Vallière, p. 107.
59 Panigarola “an den Herzog von Milan” 17 June 1476 in O., p. 295. “Si deffendono molto bene.” Jean Molinet in O., p. 464 said 200 died, “ensemble deux cents Bourguignons.” Hans Viol in O., p. 496 stated there were more than 1000 casualties, “me dann tusent man.”
60 Schilling (Bern), 2: 38-9. “Iederman in der stat manlich und willig und kein verzager under inen was.” Schilling (Bern) interviewed Bubenberg after the battle.
61 Bern an Zürich 19 June 1476 in O., p. 292. “In ansehen daß inen etlich türn und die nur zum sorgklichsten uff den boden nider geschoßen sie, und standen mit iren bloßen liben zur gegenwer uff dem bollwerk.”
with military prowess would respond to his invasion. The Swiss fought to protect their homes, lands, and their highly-prized liberties and privileges. They knew well the severe cost of defeat, and they reacted with impressive strength to the threat. Large Swiss armies soon assembled near Bern, and the forces of Unterwalden, Luzern, Uri, and Schwyz, presented themselves on 18 June 1476. Troops from Basel, Fribourg, Solothurn, Biel, Zug, Glarus, and contingents of knights on horseback from Lorraine, Strasbourg, and various areas of Alsace soon came as well. Many of these men marched night and day to meet the Burgundian threat and raise the siege of Murten. While some forces, largely from St. Gallen, were still expected to arrive, the Zurich contingent was viewed as essential to the war effort, and no major attack was undertaken until it arrived. Hans Waldmann commanded Zurich’s forces of 2,000 men. They left the city on 19 June, also marching night and day, and they met the rest of the army in the evening of 21 June at the bridge at Gümmenen, having walked roughly eighty-five miles in three days. Hundreds of exhausted men fell out before they reached their goal, but when the other Zurichers arrived, the army was then assembled for action.

The size of the Swiss army at the battle of Murten was probably larger than the force at Granson. Panigorola stated he talked with two prominent Swiss prisoners after the battle at Murten who told him that there were 30,000 men on foot and 1,600 on horseback with the army. Recent historians have estimated the size of the Swiss infantry at nearly 24,000 men. Bern was most threatened by the invasion, and it sent the largest contingent of men, fielding about 7,800 troops, including the garrison of 1,500 or more men in Murten. This was most impressive because it represented about three quarters of the estimated 10 to 11,000 adult males available for military service in the state.

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63 Brennwald, 2: 253; Edlibach, p. 155; and “Die Zürcher Hauptleute vor Murten an Zürich,” 24 June 1476 in O., p. 315.
64 Panigarola as cited in Oechsli (1918), pp. 189-90.
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The Burgundians built a barrier, the “green hedge” (grünhag) or palisade, to stop any Swiss advance from the direction of Bern. The men dug trenches, constructed fences, and placed many cannon to fortify the position, and Charles hoped his artillery and bowmen would destroy the Swiss before they could break through it.\(^{67}\) Professor Grosjean has argued that the Duke’s men also constructed a line jutting out from the palisade from which to fire into the flank of the Swiss when they advanced. Grosjean estimated that “at least 100-150 cannon were placed there.”\(^{68}\) These guns did the most damage to the Swiss forces during the battle.

The Swiss and their allies planned to attack on Saturday 22 June 1476, a holy day on the Christian calendar known as the “day of ten thousand knights” (zehntausend Rittertag) or day of the “Ten Thousand Martyrs.”\(^{69}\) The commanders of the various forces met in a war council the morning of the engagement to decide on a course of action and how to deploy their troops.\(^{70}\) Wilhelm Herter placed the forces in order for battle, but there was probably no overall commander since such a position was against Swiss custom and practice. Once the battle was joined, the various commanders over smaller units were supposed to lead their men and make sure that they carried out their assignments.\(^{71}\)

The Swiss were arrayed in three large battle formations. The “vanguard” (Vorhut) comprised roughly five thousand men chiefly from Bern, Fribourg, and Schwyz. Likely, the Bernese stood in the first lines of this configuration because they were motivated to fight well, to lift the siege of Murten, and to save their fellow countrymen. In the center of the vanguard stood men carrying harquebuses and crossbows, and pikemen were placed on the sides of the configuration. Hans von Hallwil, a respected military leader and citizen of Bern, led the vanguard, and heavy cavalry numbering 1,500 knights, largely from Alsace, accompanied the disposition. The “main mass” formation

\(^{67}\) Edlibach, p. 155 and “Die Anonyme Chronik der Burgunderkriege,” *Bas. Chr.*, 5: 522.

\(^{68}\) Grosjean, p. 54. “Mindestens 100-150 Geschütze aufgestellt werden.”

\(^{69}\) Catholic Encyclopedia, s.v. “Ten Thousand Martyrs.”

\(^{70}\) Brennwald, 2: 254 and Diebold Schilling, *Diebold Schilling’s des Lucerners Schweizer-Chronik*, (Lucern: Schiffman, 1862), p. 83. This author was the nephew of Schilling (Bern) and will be hereafter cited as Schilling (Luzern).

Battle of Murten by Schilling (Luzern). Upper left: the Swiss attack. Lower right: the Burgundians are slaughtered.

(Gewalthauen) was comprised of 10,000 or more men. The principal banners of the Swiss states stood in the center of this formation protected by rows of men wielding halberds and by pikemen in contingents of 1,000. The final configuration was the "rearguard" (Nachhut), led by Kaspar von Hertenstein of Luzern. This formation was considered "large and powerful" (gros und stark), but it was not more carefully described. Likely, it was arrayed similar to the "main mass" with rows of halberdiers and men with pikes.\footnote{Schilling (Bern), 2: 45-6.}

A heavy rain storm struck in the middle of the night before the battle, and the severe weather made a Swiss attack seem unlikely. Charles allowed most of his men to remain in their various camps around Murten in the morning, and the Burgundian positions were seriously undermanned when the Confederates struck them. The Duke made significant errors at the beginning of the battle. He had failed to make a proper reconnaissance of the Swiss forces, knew little about the size and disposition of the opposing army, and reacted slowly when he learned of the enemy approach. Only when the vanguard of the Swiss
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army advanced from the forest did the Duke order his men to their positions. Many of his troops were putting on their armor and running to their place in battle when the Confederates struck their lines. Charles was also slow to don his armor and to mount his horse. His indecision meant that his army was poorly prepared to meet the attack, and he was not at the scene when his leadership was most needed. By the time he was ready for action, his army was already fleeing from the enemy.  

The Swiss marched through the forest during the heavy rain, but the storm abated when they finally broke clear of the trees in the early afternoon, and it was "a beautiful, bright day." The vanguard with the cavalry on its flank halted briefly to adjust their lines, and they came under heavy fire from the Burgundian cannon shooting from the fortified "green hedge" position. The artillery fire was so heavy that it fell "thick as hail." The cannon shots blew gaps in the Swiss formations and mutilated the knights on horseback. An eyewitness described the scene.

"The enemy had strengthened [their position] well and shot [their], first-rate large cannon exceptionally well . . . against the Confederates and their formations [also] against the knights, . . . and they did great damage [to them]. Then I, Peterman Etterlin, the composer of this chronicle, and many other pious man who were there, saw some cavalrymen and knights shot in two at the middle so that the top part was blown away and the bottom part remained in the saddle. The same happened to some whose head [was blown] off."  

While some of the wounds were ghastly, the losses were relatively few, and the Swiss soon filled in the spaces in their formations and continued to advance. The Burgundian artillery was highly effective, but the guns were cumbersome to reload, and their rate of fire was too slow to stem the attack. The vanguard and the "main mass" (Gewalthaufen) advanced toward the weakest points of the green hedge, which were roads that led through the position for egress and entry. Even though these gaps were narrow and could only accommodate three or four horses abreast, they were weak points where the line could be breached.

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74 Schilling (Luzern), p. 83.
75 Panigarola as cited in Oechsli, p. 188.
When the Swiss approached, the Burgundians counter attacked with their cavalry, but the numbers of knights on horseback were too few to change the course of battle, and they killed only 10 or 12 enemy.\textsuperscript{77} The fight at the green hedge was brief as the Swiss stormed the position, and the artillerymen were the first to be cut down.\textsuperscript{78} The Swiss struck hard against their enemies, slashing and thrusting with their weapons, as they cut their way into the Burgundian forces. The Confederates overwhelmed the badly outnumbered forces at the green hedge and broke through. Charles's cavalry made one last attempt to stem the tide, but the counterattack was weak, and it failed. The garrison in Murten also joined the battle and rushed out of the fortress to attack their enemy's rear. The Duke's army soon fell apart and took to a "most shocking and most disgraceful flight."\textsuperscript{79}

The Burgundians ran for safety, but many were cut down as the Swiss showed no mercy, took no prisoners, and killed every man they could. Numerous Burgundian soldiers made pathetic attempts to save their lives. Panigarola saw men throw off their helmets and lie on the ground with their arms crossed showing that the Swiss could easily bind them as captives.\textsuperscript{80} They were all killed. Many men had no recourse but to retreat into the waters of Lake Murten, and "an unspeakably large number

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\textsuperscript{76} Etterlin, Kronica, p. 209.
\textsuperscript{77} Edlibach, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{78} Schilling (Luzern), p. 83 and Etterlin, p. 209.
\textsuperscript{79} Thomas Basin in O., p. 462, "foedissima et ignominiosissima fuga." Etterlin, p. 209.
\textsuperscript{80} Panigarola as cited in Oechsli, p. 189.
of men were] forced into the lake and drowned." Some waded out into the lake until the water reached their necks and chins, and they threw away their weapons and begged to be spared. The Confederates stabbed the men they could reach from the shore, and the Swiss also took boats onto the lake to continue to kill the men in the water. A few of the Burgundians might have taken off their armor and swam the two miles across the lake to survive, but the rest of the troops in the lake drowned or were killed.

Some of the Burgundian troops climbed walnut trees to get out of the reach, and the Swiss shot them down with their harquebuses and hand cannon like they were so many squirrels or birds. The Confederates also used their long pikes to stab these men who were hiding among the branches. Ironically, the garrison at Granson had been hanged on walnut trees, and the Swiss partially avenged those executions by killing soldiers hiding in the same variety of plants. A few of the Duke’s men tried to hide in baker ovens in nearby villages, while others hid in houses and huts. Some of the buildings were set on fire, and all the men were killed. Many women were among the Duke’s men wearing armor. They were likely prostitutes who wore men’s clothing to hide their gender, and many of them had to show their genitals and breasts to the Swiss to prove they were women and avoid being killed. The Swiss fished the corpses of their enemies out of the lake and buried them in two large pits with the men killed on the land. Their bones were later placed in an ossuary (Beinhaus).

Many Swiss no doubt sought revenge for the Duke’s execution of the garrison at Granson and also for the wanton destruction of lands and people when his army advanced into the Confederation. But a reason is never an excuse for misconduct, and the Confederates were no more justified in killing these hapless men than was the Duke in his many acts of brutality. The Swiss clearly showed their ferocity and sent a grave warning to anyone invading their lands, but they gained little or no military or political advantages from this carnage. The fleeing

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84 Schilling (Bern), 2: 50.
troops posed no threat to the Swiss, and many of the knights were valuable resources because they could have been held for ransom. Certainly, the dead could never again menace the Confederation, but the loss of these troops hardly prevented Charles from raising another army, hiring other mercenaries, and again threatening the interests of the Confederation. Clearly, there would have been difficulties and much expense to house and feed large numbers of prisoners for any length of time, but these problems were solvable, and the captives could have been sheltered and released later under favorable terms. Swiss brutality also caused animosity between nations for centuries as demonstrated by the conduct of French soldiers who conquered Switzerland in 1798. A portion of these men was from the Burgundian areas of France, and they took some small revenge on the Swiss by destroying the ossuary at Murten.85

The victorious Confederates seized the Burgundian camp and took large amounts of booty including many weapons and hundreds of cannon. While the captured materials never reached the impressive haul taken at Granson, the Swiss seized many textiles, much merchandise, and large amounts of money.86 No precise tally of the dead at Murten was made, and the total losses on both sides have been subject to considerable speculation. But the Burgundian losses were severe, and the estimates of the dead ranged largely from 6,000 to 30,000.87 The higher conjectures were exaggerations because the numbers probably exceeded the size of the Duke’s army. The most accurate numbers were likely presented by the men on the scene who had the opportunity to examine the battlefield and see the dead. Most of them stated that about 10,000 men had died.88 In comparison, the Swiss losses were small, and most accounts reported that the numbers of dead were a few score

85 O., pp. 520-3.
86 Schilling (Bern), 2: 54.
87 Jean Moulinet in O., p. 465 said 6 to 7,000 dead. Knebel in Basler Chroniken, 3: 13 said 14,000 dead. Comines Memoirs (London: Bohn, 1855), 1:316 said 18,000 dead. Circular Zürichs in O., p. 315 said 20,000 dead. Schilling (Bern), 2: 60 said 26,000 dead. Edlibach, p. 158 said 30,000 dead. Schilling (Luzern), p. 84 also recorded 30,000 dead.
88 Glarner Haupteute 22 June 1476 in O., p. 303 said 10,000 dead. Hans von Kagenbeck 23 June 1476 in O., p. 310 said 10,000. Luzerner Haupteute 24 June 1476 in O., p. 316 also said 10,000. Zürcher Haupteute 24 June 1476 in O., p. 315 said “many more” (vil mer) than 8,000 died. The highest numbers include Peter Roth 23 June 1476 in O., p. 313 which stated 20,000 died, and Etterlin, p. 211 stated “more than” (ob) 30,000 died.
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When his army crumbled at Murten, Charles the Bold joined his men and fled to save his life. He rode for days and finally stopped when he reached Gex. Despite his severe defeat, Charles regained his old optimism. He joked, reorganized his forces, and planned further campaigns, but his fortunes never recovered. He was completely cut off from Savoy, he had lost the Vaud, and his army was never again as large as the one destroyed at Murten. In January 1477, the Duke again laid siege to Nancy. A coalition of forces gathered to meet him, and he was badly outnumbered when the battle took place on 5 January. Many Swiss were among his enemies, and they played a prominent role in routing his army. Charles was killed in the retreat. His body was found days later, stripped of its clothing, and his face had been partially eaten by wolves or dogs. Most of the Duke’s ambitions died with him because he had no forceful heir to take his place, and the power of Burgundy, which he had so ruthlessly enhanced, soon faded when his adversaries tried to subvert the prerogatives of his patrimony and take his possessions.

The spectacular Swiss success at Murten was much celebrated, and historians have long considered it one of the most lopsided and influential victories in European history. As Vaughan stated, it was, “one of the most destructive and decisive battles in the military history of the middle ages.” In the scope of military history, Murten foreshadowed a new era of warfare because it demonstrated the effectiveness of men on foot. This helped set in motion a revolution in military tactics in which infantries became more important than the heavily armored knight on horseback. Hans Delbrück, a prominent military historian, stated that Murten was the greatest turning point in military tactics since the battle of Marathon in 490 BC. This victory of free men had a social

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89 Glarnar Hauptleute 22 June 1476 in O., p. 303 stated “very few” (gar wenig) were either killed or wounded. Peter Roth 23 June 1476 in O., p. 313 stated 24 were killed. Veit Weber in O., p. 449 said “not 20” (nit zweintzig) had been killed. Etterlin, p. 211 “not 50” (nit Fünfzig). Hans Tüschi in O., p. 445 said “not 40” (nix vierzig). Hans Fugger in O., p. 451 said about 250 died. Jörg Molbinger 27 June 1476 in O., p. 340 said no more than 500 died.


91 Kurz, Schweizerschlachten, pp. 124-5.

92 Vaughan, p. 394.

impact as well because it contributed to the decline of feudalism. As Rudolf Steiner stated, perhaps with some exaggeration, "The defeat of Charles the Bold in the battle of Murten was an extremely significant symptom for it gave the death blow to chivalry." The victory also became a symbol of Swiss national pride and determination in which they demonstrated their strength, resolve, organization, and skill. The Swiss had preserved their independence, confirmed their national identity, demonstrated the viability of the Swiss Confederation and, in the process, had destroyed one of the most powerful and ruthless leaders in all Europe.

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94 Rudolf Steiner, From Symptom to Reality in Modern History: Nine Lectures given in Dornach from 18th October to 3rd November 1918, (London: Steiner, 1976), p. 35.