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THE SWABIAN WAR OF 1499: 500 Years Since Switzerland's Last War of Independence

Albert Winkler

Exactly 500 years ago, the Swiss Confederation faced the final threat to its existence by the Habsburg family, and the occurrence is noteworthy for several reasons. The Swabian War was the last of a series of conflicts reaching back centuries in which the Swiss states had to ward off determined invasions from an external foe. Significantly, they did not have to do so again for nearly three centuries when the French armies overran the Confederation in 1798. The Swabian War also ended the threat of Habsburg or Austrian domination which had been a serious menace for many generations. The survival of the Swiss experience was thus assured meaning that the unique features of the Confederation and its society would survive and eventually provide an example of democracy, personal freedom, toleration, and cooperation that would gain the attention and admiration of much of Western civilization.

The frequency of war and the violent tenor of life during of the late Middle Ages meant that political independence and personal liberties had to be won and protected by the force of arms by a society willing to organize and employ its resources for military action. The Swiss were an anomaly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries because most states at that time still relied on a professional class of warriors or knights for protection, while the Confederation largely used free peasants to guard their lands. The existence of large numbers of privileged commoners among the Swiss was a clear contrast to the serfs which made up the bulk of the lower classes in the nearby lands of southern Germany and the Tirol area of Austria. To maintain their position, the German nobles had to deal constantly with problems of resistance from their unfree workers, while the Swiss had already weakened the power of the titled land owners on their lands.

The resulting Swiss society was, in many respects, annoyingly egalitarian to the mores of upper class persons from foreign lands. Balcius, a Milanese emissary, described Swiss society around the year 1500 near the time of the Swabian War. According to Balcius, whenever the Swiss disagreed among themselves, they always used the arbitration of a neutral party to settle the matter, and the people of the Confederation were not judged according to a written law code but according to custom. He further noted that the Swiss were accustomed to robbing and plundering, but they were

very generous in giving to the poor. Near destitute students were accustomed to begging or singing for meals which, at times, were lavish affairs. When noblemen came to visit the Swiss as official representatives, they were given large banquets where many poor people of the "despised" lower classes were present as well as important men. It was imperative that the emissaries allow these common people to come before them, and care had to be taken to be friendly to these low class persons and to let them eat plentifully. If disdain was shown to the lower segments of society, this would be a diplomatic blunder and eternal hate and enmity would follow. Clearly, the people took much joy in their freedoms, and virtually everyone felt responsible for the laws of the land. Obviously, Balcus found Swiss society surprisingly and annoyingly egalitarian.¹

Freedom in the Middle Ages generally meant privilege including the right to perform certain social functions and to receive legal and financial benefits. Often, the most coveted prerogative of a free man was the right to bear arms and to serve in the military because this directly took the function of the defense of society from the hands of the knights and placed it with the peasants and citizens of towns.

The most continuous threat to Swiss independence was the fear of Habsburg domination. The Swiss wars of independence were fought largely in the fourteenth century, and, by 1499, the ten states which comprised the Swiss Confederation at that point had gained their liberty at the expense of the Habsburgs.² In the battles of Morgarten in 1315, Sempach in 1386, and Näfels in 1388, the Swiss threw off the domination of the ruling house of Austria. They also demonstrated their ability to maintain their independence throughout the turbulent fifteenth century when the Burgundian armies under Charles the Bold were destroyed, and when Habsburg attempts to weaken or break apart the Confederation were frustrated. And hatred of the house of Austria continued. In fact, anyone who displayed the emblems of the Habsburg in Swiss lands did so at the peril of his life.

The Swiss military system had been the subject of a lengthy evolution by 1499. During the fourteenth century, the Swiss largely went to battle wielding halberds, which were axes on poles from five to eight feet in length. The ax heads also had a spear point protruding from their top, and they usually had a hook on the opposite side from the ax blade. These weapons were versatile because the spear point was used for stabbing, the ax blade for slashing, and the hook to snag the armor of the mounted knight, so he could be pulled from his horse. The Swiss frequently used a battle formation called the *Keil* (wedge) which was a triangular in nature and used to attack enemy forces.

The wedge was recognized as inadequate in the face of changing military circumstances in the fifteenth century. After suffering defeat at the hands of Italian knights attacking from horseback at the battle of Arbedo in 1422, the Swiss began to reorganize their weaponry and military

¹"Urteil des Mailander Balcus über die Eidgenossen um 1500," as cited in Wilhelm Oechli ed., *Quellenbuch zur Schweizergeschichte* (Zürich: Schulthess, 1893), pp. 470-3. All translations were made by the author unless otherwise designated.

²By 1353 the Confederation included Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Luzern, Zurich, Glarus, Zug, and Bern. Fribourg and Solothurn joined in 1481.

formations. By the Burgundian War of 1474-77, the Confederates had developed their mature military system. At this point, the Swiss usually went to war in three square battle formations called *Haufen* (heap, mass). These groups were deployed in battle close enough to support each other but were also capable of independent maneuvers. Rows of men on each side of the structure wielded pikes which were spears roughly eighteen feet in length and were designed to thwart cavalry attacks. In the center of the formation, the men carried halberds. When engaging infantry, the halberdiers rushed past the pikemen to engage the enemy using the shorter weapons. If the *Haufen* was surrounded by superior forces, it would stop and turn its weapons outward to meet attacks from all directions. This formation was called *Igel* (hedgehog) and was the most formidable of any deployment of Swiss forces because, once formed, it was never penetrated by enemy forces.³ The effectiveness of the Confederate military system was demonstrated in a spectacular fashion at the battle of Murten in 1476. In a victory which gained the attention of all of Europe, the Swiss annihilated an army of Charles the Bold of Burgundy. This meant that the formations and weaponry of the Confederation would be copied in many lands, and infantries would eventually replace cavalry as the most important segment of European armies.. According to the eminent German military historian, Hans Delbrück, the Swiss victory at Murten started a military revolution making it the greatest turning point in military tactics since the battle of Marathon in 490 BC.⁴

Men frequently served in the Swiss army with those of their local areas, and there was a strong identification for the troops with their village, valley, or guild. Even in the largest battle formations, men stood side-by-side with their friends, relatives, and co-workers. This clearly aided in comradeship because the soldiers wanted to perform well under the eyes of their closest associates. But such proximity could lead to the loss of a large percentage of men from various communities. At the battle of Calven in May of 1499 for example, family members stood so close together that a single cannon shot killed seven men including four brothers.⁵

By the late fourteenth century, the office of Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire was controlled by the Habsburg as demonstrated by the rule of Albert II 1438-9, Frederick III 1440-93, and subsequently by Maximilian I 1493-1519. Despite the fact that most of this family's holdings were centered around Vienna and the southeastern part of the Empire, the Austrian ruling house kept designs on the rest of the German lands. The Habsburg emperors clearly wanted to aggrandize their position by the creation of a united Germany with them at its head, and the continuing menace of

³For a detailed discussion of the Swiss military, see Carl von Elgger, *Kriegswesen und Kriegskunst der Schweizerischen Eidgenossen in XIV., XV. und XVI. Jahrhundert* (Luzern: Militärisches Verlagsbureau, 1873).

⁴Hans Delbrück, *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte*, 6 vols. (Berlin: Georg Stilke, 1923) 3: 619.

⁵C. Jecklin and F. Jecklin, *Der Anteil Graubündens am Schwabenkrieg* (Davos: E. Richer, 1899), p. 72. For a careful discussion of Swiss battle formations, see Johannes Häne, *Militärisches aus dem alten Zürichkrieg: zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Infanterie* (Zürich: Bopp, 1928).

France from the west and the Turks from the southeast lent credence to the emperors' continuous appeals for cooperation and unity.

In the 1480s Maximilian increasingly made his presence felt in Austrian politics. When his father Frederick III, always considered a weak ruler, became increasingly debilitated with age, Maximilian worked to expand Habsburg power. Problems beset the family's holdings including raids from the Turks, a feud with the Hungarian monarchy, and the fact that Bavaria was increasingly hostile. Additionally, Sigismund Habsburg tried to take the Austrian Tirol from Frederick's control in 1487. Maximilian realized he must have an active, powerful army to resist such internal and external threats.⁶

Maximilian began to reorganize the Habsburg army in the mid 1480s. He recognized that the Swiss infantry's organization and tactics could be copied by the peasantry of the Swabian areas of southern Germany bordering and near the Confederation. He believed that an army based on mercenaries from the peasant classes could form an infantry that should be effective and was potentially loyal to a central monarch which paid its wages. Clearly, the most valuable persons to help organize the Swabian peasants were the Swiss themselves. An obscure knight, Konrad Gächuf von Gesswil, was the most instrumental person in hiring mercenaries from the Confederation to teach the Swabians the organization, tactics, and the wielding of weapons used by the Swiss.⁷

Starting in 1486, when Gächuf's Swiss began their instruction, the Swabian infantry began to prove its abilities on the battlefields of Europe. These mercenaries, called *Landsknechte* by Maximilian, had a deep hatred for the Swiss, a hostility which stemmed from raids and petty intermittent warfare between the two peoples which had occurred for many generations.⁸ These Swabian mercenaries, with confidence acquired from their early successes, soon showed their contempt for the Swiss and became anxious to test their abilities against their former teachers. In 1488 Maximilian and Frederick III formed the Swabian League, consisting of nobles and cities of southern Germany. Relying on the alliance and using the *Landsknechte* as its chief military contingent, Maximilian and his father quelled Bavaria's rebelliousness and defeated Sigismund to retain the Tirol.⁹

The existence of the powerful Swabian League on their borders made the Swiss suspicious of its intended purposes. Even though the League was clearly directed at Bavaria and the Tirol, the Confederates feared that Frederick would one day be tempted to use it against them. The nobility of

⁶Emil Dürr, "Die Politik der Eidgenossen im XIV und XV Jahrhundert," *Schweizer Kriegsgeschichte* 4 (1933): 469-70.

⁷Johannes Häne, "Die Kriegsbereitschaft der alten Eidgenossen," *Schweizer Kriegsgeschichte* 3 (1915): 11-12 and Emil Frey, *Die Kriegstaten der Schweizer dem Volk erzählt* (Neuenburg: F. Bahn, 1904), p. 335.

⁸Petterman Etterlin, *Kronica von der loblichen Eidgnoschaft* (Basel: Daniel Eckstein, 1752), p. 231. This item was written in 1507.

⁹Dürr, "Politik," pp. 470-4.

South Germany in the Swabian League did nothing to calm such fears because the lords were contemptuous of the Confederation. As they watched their feudal rights threatened by the pressures of a discontented peasantry prone to violence, these nobles became fearful that the existence of the free and democratic Swiss on their borders was a serious social danger because their peasants sought liberties similar to those enjoyed by the Confederates. As a result, the German nobles talked of dividing up the Confederation, repressing Swiss privileges, and establishing nobles over the people.¹⁰

The Swiss, long protective of their hard-won rights, deeply resented any idea of having the nobility established in their lands and losing their freedoms.¹¹ The agitation resulting from such talk, and the mutual hatred between the Swiss and the Swabians, nearly led to war in October of 1488, but before there was any clash of arms, angers cooled and war was averted. However, none of the issues relating to this mutual distrust and fear had been resolved.¹²

France long waged an unfriendly policy against the Empire, and it was in the French monarchy's interest to prevent German unity. French strategy included remaining on friendly terms with the Swiss to assure the use of mercenaries from their lands and to influence the Confederation to remain hostile to the Empire. The agents of the French king, Charles VIII, distributed money to assure pro-French sentiments in the Confederation and propaganda intended to inflame Swiss mistrust of the Habsburgs and the Empire. Charles further stirred Swiss feelings by employing Confederate mercenaries from the areas bordering the Swabians, where antagonism remained high, against the *Landsknechte* on operations in Flanders.¹³

Long before his father's death on 19 August 1493, Maximilian sought reforms that would unify and strengthen the Empire. Ascending the throne as Maximilian I, he took further steps to implement his policies. He instituted the Common Penny (*Gemeine Pfennig*) or universal tax of the Empire and strengthened the Imperial Supreme Court. He wanted the Common Penny paid by all areas of Germany to support an army that would protect the realm from external threats and to assure the loyalty of the various areas within the domain. Maximilian also wanted the Supreme Court to handle all legal disputes within the Empire to guarantee justice and peace.

The new emperor explained his reforms at the Diet of Worms in 1495. He promised the various lands of the realm a voice in the government upon the payment of the Common Penny, he spoke of re-establishing the indefinable old boundaries of the Empire, and he fervently warned of the dangers of disunity.¹⁴ Despite his plea for cooperation, the members of the Diet showed little

¹⁰Christopher Hare, *Maximilian the Dreamer: Holy Roman Emperor 1459-1519* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, [1913]), p. 98.

¹¹Johann Lenz, *Der Schwabenkrieg* (Zürich: Orell, Füssli, 1849), p. 27. Written in 1500, Lenz is the most complete and distinguished chronicle on the war.

¹²Frey, *Kriegstaten der Schweizer*, p. 334.

¹³Dürr, pp. 481-2.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

enthusiasm for his policies, and the Swiss states believed the reforms did not apply to them. Most of the Swiss states had not attended an Imperial Diet for decades, and only representatives from Bern were present at Worms in 1495. The other members of the Confederation considered these reforms as vain rhetoric. The Swiss states saw the Common Penny as unnecessary because they already had a fine military system, and the Supreme Court was in direct conflict with their developing system of law and courts called the Justice Awakening. The Swiss Confederation was developing towards its own distinct national character and was sure to resent any attempt by the Empire to hamper or limit that evolution. When Maximilian's representatives visited the Confederation to institute the Common Penny, they were politely yet definitely turned away in most areas, and Zurich's city council even refused to meet them.¹⁵

When the reformed Supreme Court of the Empire passed judgments unfavorable to the Swiss states, both the Confederation and Empire began to prepare for war. The court stated that Rottweil and Schaffhausen had no legal claim to certain areas and ordered these territories delivered to the Empire, but both towns, supported by the Confederation, refused to vacate the disputed lands and ignored the decisions. Angered by Swiss defiance, Maximilian threatened war if the Swiss states remained obstinate, but the Confederation would not be bullied and began to prepare for hostilities. To make good his threat, Maximilian also began military preparations. Even though negotiations continued, both sides were clearly disinterested in compromising.¹⁶

While the Empire's preparations advanced slowly, the Swiss were soon on a war footing. As a precaution the Swiss cities had begun, in 1490, to store a year's supply of grain and, in 1495, they restricted grain exports leaving over the St. Gotthard Pass.¹⁷ When war had threatened in 1488, the members of the Confederation met to agree on cooperation in the case of hostilities, and, when military action seemed likely before 1499, the Swiss simply recognized the agreements they had already made.¹⁸

As the Swiss Confederation and the German Empire moved closer to war, another dispute became heated. This controversy involved the Austrian-controlled Tirol and Graubünden (Grey League) which was located in the mountains east of the Confederation. Graubünden consisted of three small leagues in and around Chur called the Rätier that was similar in composition to the Swiss Confederation. The freedom-loving Rätiers formed the pact in 1424 to insure their independence from the Habsburgs, but the continuous threat from the House of Austria made this autonomy

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 484-5 and Frey, p. 336.

¹⁶Frey, p. 336.

¹⁷Häne, "Kriegsbereitschaft," pp. 20-22.

¹⁸Heinrich Brennwald, *Schweizerchronik*, 2 vols. (Basel: Basler Buch- und Antiquariatshandlung, 1910) 2: 339. Written between 1508 and 1516, this is a valuable early source on the war.

uncertain.¹⁹ The Tirol was involved with the Grey League in a number of boundary disputes because the borders of the two antagonists had never been clearly defined. In some of these disputed areas both free farmers and peasants owing allegiance to the Bishop of Tirol lived side by side. Graubünden wanted these lands made free, while the regency of Tirol would hear nothing about extended liberties and was willing to go to war rather than allow the contested areas the liberty to join the Grey League.²⁰ Threatened by the power of Austria, the Rätiers joined the Swiss Confederation in 1497 in a treaty of mutual cooperation in the case of war.²¹

Before the entire situation degenerated into war, the Swiss made a final attempt to negotiate by sending emissaries to the Imperial Diet to ask to be free of the Common Penny and the Supreme Court of the Empire. This was to no avail. While the representatives watched, the angry Bertold, archbishop and Elector of Mainz, swore to establish lords over the Swiss and, brandishing a quill pen, threatened to sign documents placing the Confederation under the interdict. Not lacking in bravado, one emissary stated that weapons had been sent to conquer them which they could respect, but they were not afraid of goose feathers.²²

Clearly, Maximilian's choice of the Swiss Confederation as a test case to show his ability to enforce his reform programs was misdirected. The Swiss had long been virtually independent from the power of the Habsburgs, and their autonomy from the German Empire had long been accomplished. In his war against the Confederation, Maximilian appeared to be a foreign invader rather than a monarch asserting his rights. The Swiss states possessed one of the most effective armies in central Europe making any confrontation risky business indeed. Additionally, the Confederation was economically weak, and that nation was considered among the poor areas of Europe. By 1499, the most valuable Swiss export was mercenaries indicating that grown men in the Swiss states had a better chance of supporting themselves by risking their lives abroad than by attempting to find gainful employment at home. The conquest of the Confederation, if successful, would bring Maximilian little revenue and would probably strain his own pressed resources to dominate such a rebellious people. The German Emperor would have done better to test his strength against a more promising target, but Maximilian, as a Habsburg, probably wanted, at least in part, to redress old insults to his family's honor.

Maximilian's forces faced contingents of the Swiss army all along the Rhine River during the winter of 1498-9. The hatred and sense of rivalry between the two armies eventually led to armed clashes. The first war-like moves were taken by the Swiss when they seized mountain passes in the

¹⁹Frey, p. 339.

²⁰Fritz Rieter, "Der Schwabenkrieg vor 450 Jahren," *Schweizer Monatshefte* 29 (June 1949): 132.

²¹Elgger, *Kriegswesen*, p. 398.

²²Brennwald, *Schweizerchronik*, 2: 344. See also Valerius Anshelm, *Die Berner-Chronik*, 6 vols. (Bern: K. J. Wyss, 1886) 2: 112. Written between 1530 and 1536, this is one of the finest sources on the war standing next to the work of Lenz.

Alps and Juras, but, meeting no resistance, the war did not start with those actions.²³ Late in January of 1499, Tirolese soldiers crossed the Rhine into Graubünden. They were quickly confronted and driven back across the river thus starting the war between Tirol and the Rätiers.

The Swiss Confederation was soon drawn into war as well. The troops on either side of the Rhine, bored by occupying static positions in the cold winter months, amused themselves by shouting insults back and forth. At Gutenberg, the *Landsknechte* mocked the Swiss by composing unchristian songs that offended the pious Confederates. The final affront came when the German mercenaries offended the Swiss' sexual preferences. The Swabians displayed a cow and called to the Confederates to come over and make love to the animal. The men then mooed like cows and calves. Shortly, the Swiss leader from the state of Uri, Heini Wolleb, took a group of men across the river and burned a house and stall. At this point, the war began in earnest.²⁴

When hostilities began, the opposing forces soon lined up. Maximilian appealed to the Empire for aid, but the Tirol and the Swabian League contributed the most support. The Swiss Confederation and Graubünden fought as allies, and Louis XII of France promised funds and cannon. The artillery was delayed and never reached the Confederation in time to be employed in battle, but the money arrived in time and clearly aided the war effort.²⁵

The Swabian War was poorly planned by each antagonist, and overall strategy consisted largely of border raids which involved the destruction of villages and the seizing of booty. Only a handful of major engagements took place which never involved the entire armies of either side. One historian described the senseless and destructive nature of the conflict as war for war's sake.²⁶

The Empire had to wait many weeks to gather enough troops to take definite action. These armies manned positions of strength usually within castles or fortified towns from which the soldiers could resist Swiss raids and stage their own. Heinrich von Fürstenberg led the Empire's forces aided by his two brothers, Wolfgang and Ulrich.²⁷ In April, Maximilian himself came to South Germany to give the war more definite direction, and he decided to operate against Graubünden before facing the entire Confederation.

Maximilian faced many problems in waging the war. He had insufficient funds to pay his troops, and the contingents of his army, from various parts of the Empire, constantly squabbled over petty matters, making a unified war effort difficult. Maximilian tried to solve these problems by

²³K. Klüpfel, ed. *Urkunden zur Geschichte des Schwäbischen Bundes (1488-1533)* (Stuttgart: Bibliothek Literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart, 1846) 14: 281.

²⁴Frey, pp. 341-2.

²⁵Rieter, "Der Schwabenkrieg," 134.

²⁶Hans Rudolf Kurz, *Schweizerschlachten* (Bern: Francke, 1962), p. 141.

²⁷Albert Büchi, ed. *Aktenstücke zur Geschichte des Schwabenkrieges nebst einer Freiburger Chronik über die Ereignisse von 1499*, 20 vols. (Basel: Basler Buch- und Antiquariatshandlung, 1901), pp. 166-7. This is a collection of over 700 letters from 1499.

personally overseeing military preparations. He arose before anyone else in the mornings and worked well into the night. He spoke almost exclusively of the war and continually worked on finances and wrote letters, but he was unable to bring the proper resources to bear in the war effort to assure victory.²⁸

The overall strategy of the Empire and the Confederation had much in common. The Swiss also garrisoned various castles, fortified towns, and churches to deter enemy attacks and to use as staging areas for raids of their own. Few funds were available to pay Swiss troops, but numerous successful raids provided enough plunder to satisfy many of the soldiers. However, major invasions of enemy territory were impractical because about two-thirds of the Swiss border faced the Empire, and many troops were required to watch these areas.²⁹ Additionally, the Swiss Confederation did not enjoy political solidarity, and it went to war with little enthusiasm from some states. Basel was friendly to the Confederation but provided no help beyond feeding groups of Swiss soldiers on several occasions.³⁰ The largest detriment to a unified war effort was Bern's indifference because it went to war reluctantly. Bern was the most powerful Swiss state militarily, and its lack of enthusiasm placed the entire war effort at a disadvantage. When Bern's troops marched out of the city on 12 February, the people lining the streets made fun of the fact so few men followed the town's banners.³¹

Despite Bern's initial reluctance to fully support the war effort, the number of Swiss men in service at times during the war was impressive. Bernardin de Vegiis wrote to the duke of Milan on 19 April 1499 and estimated that the Swiss and their allies had 34,400 men under arms at that point.³² Modern scholarship has indicated that the Confederation and its close associates probably had about 70,000 adult men within their populations at this time meaning that the estimate of Vegiis was reasonable even though its accuracy cannot be precisely verified.³³ The employment of such a large percentage of available manpower within two months of the start of hostilities gives an indication of how rapidly the Swiss could mobilize to meet any external threat.

While the nature of military training for adults among the Swiss is obscure, their effectiveness in battle clearly indicates they were given some instruction. But martial training among the youth is much better documented. During the war, the young boys of Wil were seen practicing in the town. These children spent most of the day in the alleys and streets with their little flags and sticks as if they wanted to fight the Swabians. The anonymous chronicler of Wil looked upon these activities with a

²⁸Büchi, *Aktenstücke*, pp. 166-7.

²⁹Kurz, *Schweizerschlachten*, pp. 141-2.

³⁰Lenz, *Schwabenkrieg*, pp. 107-8.

³¹Büchi, pp. 42-4.

³²"Bernardin de Vegiis an den Herzog von Mailand," 19 April 1499 as cited in Büchi, p. 167.

³³Häne, "Kriegsbereitschaft," p. 19 and Christian Padrutt, *Staat und Krieg im alten Bünden* (Zürich: Fretz & Wasmuth, 1965), p. 29.

certain amount of affection and said it was "very nice" (*wol schyn*) to see them playing in that manner.³⁴ Another contemporary writer, Jakob Wimpheling, reported that the sons of the Swiss only concerned themselves with war. "Hardly could these [Swiss] boys walk before they started wearing combat feathers and began beating their drums heavily day and night. They carried daggers above their left knee, learned to walk around proudly, dressed themselves splendidly, and with their appearance divulged a wild disposition."³⁵ The enthusiasm for the military was so strong among the youth that, at times, they attempted to join on military campaigns when they were too young to do so. Those sent home were probably little more than boys because the common age of military service was 16, and, during hard times, teenagers only 14 years old could be placed under arms.³⁶

Clearly, the Swiss could be too eager to become involved in military operations. Using the war as an excuse to raid and plunder, men often became involved in the war without official sanction. These groups were collectively known as "independent troops" (*Freiharste*). During the war, three thousand men from Luzern and Zurich united to raid across the Rhine River into Germany. They had no official sanction to do so but were recalled before they could do much damage.³⁷ In July of 1499, forces from Solothurn were operating near Basel and were followed by a group of men without orders to do so. The leaders were able to convince these independent troops to return.³⁸

The Swiss enjoyed a number of other advantages that helped assure victory. The states had long used an efficient militia (*Landsturm*) system which meant that many armed men could take the field rapidly. The Swiss could win the war simply by resisting enemy attacks, and they also enjoyed interior lines of communication making the deployment of troops much easier. The Confederation also employed numerous scouts who moved rapidly by horseback gathering and delivering information.³⁹ The determination of the Swiss was also most impressive at times and gained praise even from their enemies.

A young mercenary knight, Götzens von Berlichingen, later immortalized in a play by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, accompanied a raiding party in a night attack on Taingen (modern Thayngen) east of Schaffhausen and described an encounter with some determined Swiss there. The members of the community were coming out of their church, apparently uninformed of the presence of the German mercenaries. The knights called upon the surprised local residents to surrender, but the Confederates answered they would rather die like good Swiss than give up. A skirmish ensued,

³⁴*Wiler Chronik des Schwabenkriegs*, ed. Placid Bütler (St. Gallen: Fehr, 1914), pp. 220-1.

³⁵Jakob Wimpheling as cited in Edward A. Gessler, "Die Waffenübung der Jugend in der alten Eidgenossenschaft mit besonderer Berücksichtigung Zürichs," *Zürcher Taschenbuch* 23 (1923): 200-1.

³⁶Delbrück, *Geschichte der Kriegskunst* 3: 615.

³⁷*Wiler Chronik*, p. 225.

³⁸"Hauptleute an Solothurn," 26 July 1499 as cited in Büchi, p. 396.

³⁹Elgger, *Kriegswesen und Kriegskunst*, p. 331.

and the outnumbered Swiss ran into the church tower which was soon set on fire by the knights who exploded power behind it. The only known survivor of the tower was a small boy who toddled away from the arms of a man who had jumped from the burning building, killing himself but saving the child. The mercenaries waited in vain for the other Swiss to come out. Berlichingen assumed that the Swiss allowed themselves to be burned alive rather than come out to surrender.⁴⁰

Another example of Swiss determination and discipline occurred in the winter of 1499 in the early weeks of the war when a group of Swiss were fording the Rhine. While the men were still in the river, some German knights were spotted on the far shore a short distance away. Suspecting a trap by a large force, the Swiss leader ordered his men to stop and await the possible arrival of the enemy force. The men stood in good order for two hours in freezing water around the knees of some and the shoulders of others, until they were sure no large body of enemy appeared. Some of the Swiss died from exposure, and others suffered frozen feet and hands, but none of them left the battle order.⁴¹

The war was confined to the border areas of the Confederation and the Empire where almost constant raids and expeditions took place. Many valleys along the Rhine River were attacked several times, and these raids nearly devastated those areas on either side of the borders, burned villages and starving people being common. Some locations suffered fighting night and day, and many people were forced to flee and became refugees.⁴² The actual campaigning of the war lasted only six months, but one historian estimated that two hundred villages were burned and twenty thousand people were killed. However, there is no way to verify of such guesses.⁴³

The war caused many problems with starvation, dislocations, the plague, and wolves. The Black Death was a menace whenever bodies were left to the vermin. The plague was still a much-feared scourge at this time, and it took a toll of many unfortunate victims.⁴⁴ Wolves were also a problem when the war's dead went unburied which was often the case. These corpses were frequently devoured by birds and rats, but wolves often so gorged themselves on human flesh that they developed a taste for it. Reports stated that these animals wandered far and wide attacking adults and small children. To control the situation in the Empire, orders were given that all wolves be killed on sight.⁴⁵

⁴⁰Götzens von Berlichingen, *Lebens Beschreibung* (Nürnberg: Adam Johathan Felssecker, 1731), pp. 40-2.

⁴¹Wilibald Pirckheimer as cited by Elgger, pp. 222-3.

⁴²Büchi, pp. 109-10.

⁴³Hare, *Maximillian*, p. 102.

⁴⁴Jecklin, *Der Anteil Graubündens*, pp. 183-4 (appendix).

⁴⁵Martin Crussi, *Schwäbischer Chronik*, 2 vols., trans. Johann Jacob (Franckfurt: Metzler und Erhard, 1733), 2: 152.

While the war was very brutal, the Swiss at times showed at least some generosity and mercy. The German village of Guttendingen was probably spared from devastation in an act of kindness. According to the anonymous chronicle of Fribourg, the Swiss were laying waste to an entire area when a plea reached them from poor women, widows, and orphans to spare the town. Consequently, it was not burned.⁴⁶ On another occasion, a Swiss contingent on a raid came to the town of Torenbüren and demanded 2,200 gulden as a ransom for 160 prisoners who had recently been taken. If they were not promptly paid, the Confederates threatened to burn the forest at Bregenz. The Swiss received the money but were so moved by the plight of the poor people in the area that they returned to them 800 gulden.⁴⁷

At times, in great need of troops to defend the land, the Swiss used women and boys as combatants. In one encounter on 30 May, a German raiding party came upon a Swiss contingent. Expecting their normally aggressive adversaries to attack, the German mercenaries awaited an onslaught which never occurred. The knights soon maneuvered and advanced on the Swiss from high ground. The Confederates lost the resulting engagement, and many of them were captured. The Germans were surprised to find among the Swiss, who were starving, many women and youths dressed as men. In desperation, the Swiss had used a ruse which failed.⁴⁸

Young women were often allowed to pass freely between the armies. These "girls" (*Mädchen*) kept a channel of communications open between the antagonists and carried letters negotiating the terms of release for prisoners. In July of 1499, a letter for Maximilian was brought to Constance by an immature Swiss girl. Wilibald Pirckheimer, the German humanist, was present to witness the scene when the Emperor's men tried to intimidate the child into giving information on the Swiss army facing the city as she awaited a reply.

One man asked the girl what the Swiss were doing. She answered, "Don't you see they are awaiting your attack?" Then she was asked how many men they had. To which she replied, "Just enough to repel your advance." She also said that the men in Constance could have counted the Swiss in a recent battle before the city gates if flight had not blinded their eyes. She was then asked whether the Swiss had enough to eat, to which she simply responded, "How are they able to live if they do not eat or drink?" One of the men then tried to frighten the girl by threatening to decapitate her. When the girl saw this, she said, "Truly you are a hero that you threaten a young girl with death. When you have such a great desire to draw a sword, why don't you throw yourself on the enemy positions? There you will meet a man who will answer your courage. But it is easier to confront an unarmed and innocent girl than put yourself before an armed enemy who knows how to conduct

⁴⁶"Freiburger Chronik des Schwabenkriegs," as cited in Büchi, pp. 573-4.

⁴⁷Brennwald, 2: 372.

⁴⁸Klöpffel, *Schwäbischer Bundes*, p. 341.

himself not with words but with deeds." Pirckheimer said he was delighted with girl's answers as well as her courage and frankness.⁴⁹

Many advances were made in the cannon during and just preceding the Swabian War, making that conflict a turning point in the history of artillery. Maximilian took the first steps towards a unified caliber and barrel length during the war. In 1498 burning shells that could not be put out with water were used, and explosive shells also found early use in the war.⁵⁰ These improvements helped advance the art of war because explosive shells more rapidly reduced fortifications and did greater damage to formations of infantry. Burning shells assured that towns and fortresses could more easily be set aflame, thus reducing siege time. Better artillery tactics were also being employed. Numerous cannon were often aimed at one spot which increased their effectiveness, and firing in a barrage created a solid wall of fire. Artillery was able to shoot with increasing accuracy and ever increasing distances. Due to longer barrel lengths and improved powders, distance shots became less erratic. At one point during the war, a cannon was fired from the fortress of Constance apparently at a group of three Swiss children playing over one mile away. The shot was right on its mark, but it passed between the three children without hurting any of them.⁵¹

When artillery pieces were properly aimed, they could shoot considerable distances night and day. Many cannon were deployed around Constance, some of which are believed to have shot as far as three and a half miles.⁵² To achieve such distances, the cannon probably had a high trajectory, shooting much like mortars. Cannon had become so critical at times that the success or failure of military operations often depended on the skillful or poor use of artillery. The major drawbacks to the weapon was its slow rate of fire and the difficulty of deploying it. Even under ideal circumstances, some large pieces could fire only four times an hour.⁵³

Much of the ferocity of the war came from the great bitterness between the combatants. On the borders of Graubünden, peasants on both sides clashed nearly every day to burn and kill. The Tirolese nearly despaired because of the great destruction and feared that the judgment of God was upon them.⁵⁴

Wilibald Pirckheimer campaigned with imperial forces in Graubünden in June and wrote one of the most disturbing descriptions of the devastation of the war:

⁴⁹Wilibald Pirckheimer, *Schweizerkrieg* edited by Karl Rück (München: Akademie, 1895), pp. 112-3.

⁵⁰E. A. Gessler, *Das schweizerische Geschützwesen zur Zeit des Schwabenkriegs, 1499*, (Zürich: Kommissionsverlag Beer, 1927), pp. 7, 16, 47.

⁵¹Gerold Edlibach, *Chronik* (Zurich: Meyer und Zeller, 1847), p. 214. Written in 1506.

⁵²Gessler, *Geschützwesen*, pp. 47-8.

⁵³Elgger, pp. 135-6.

⁵⁴Pirckheimer, *Schweizerkrieg*, p. 294.

In a large mountain valley whose villages were burnt and deserted, we met two old women driving about forty little boys and girls like a flock of sheep. All were starved to the most extreme emaciation and, except that they moved, not unlike corpses, so that it was horrible to see. I asked the old women where they were leading their miserable herd. Hardly had they replied, when we came to a meadow. They turned in and falling on their knees began to eat grass like cattle, except that they picked it first with their hands instead of biting it from the roots. They had already learned the varieties of the herbage, and knew what was bitter or insipid, what sweeter or more pleasant to the taste. I was horrified at so dreadful a sight, and stood for a long time like one who cannot trust his senses.

Then the woman asked: 'Do you see why this wretched crowd is led here? Well would it have been if none of them had been born ... their fathers have fallen by the sword, their mothers have died of starvation, their property has been carried off as booty, their houses burnt; we two wretches, tottering with age, are left to lead this miserable herd like beasts to pasture, and so far as we can, keep them alive on grass. We hope that a short time will relieve them and us from our miseries. They were twice as many, but in a brief time they were reduced to this number, since daily some die of want and hunger, far happier in a quick death than in longer life.'

When I had seen and heard these things I could not restrain my tears, pitying pitiable human lot, and detesting, as every true man ought, the fury of war.⁵⁵

Even under trying circumstances, many Swiss maintained a belief that God was with them. On one occasion, a raiding party of Germans burned a church in a Swiss town. The building was entirely destroyed, but the Holy Eucharist remained completely untouched and unharmed. Many took this as a good omen which helped the Swiss take courage in difficult times.⁵⁶

While most of the engagements in the Swabian War took the form of raids, there were four major engagements as well which were highly influential in deciding the conflict in favor of the Swiss. These battles were Schwaderloh (Triboltingen), Franstanz, Calven, and Dornach.

By early April, Maximilian had assembled an impressive army around Constance, coming primarily from Swabia, Austria, and Bavaria. Many of these men had assembled in retaliation for recent raids by the Swiss, most notably a campaign in the Hegau valley east of Schaffhausen. In the last days of March, the Confederates ravaged the Hegau burning the castles of Allisberg, Ranndeck,

⁵⁵Wilibald Pirckheimer as cited and translated by Paul van Dyke, *Renascence Portraits* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), pp 318-9. Van Dyke quotes Pirckheimer, *Schweizerkrieg*, p. 110.

⁵⁶Etterlin, *Kronica*, p. 236.

Roseneck, Frydingen, Stutzlingen, Hamburg, Stouffenn, and Rietheim and destroying their nearby villages.⁵⁷

Facing the German forces at Constance was a series of garrisons protecting the Thurgau valley which were manned mostly by men from the area, but they also included detachments from other Swiss areas. The village of Ermatingen was garrisoned by four hundred men from Bern and Fribourg. These forces engaged in skirmishes almost daily with detachments from Constance, and the village of Ow was subject to frequent bombardment from the cannon positioned in the city. To return fire, two large cannon were sent from Luzern early in April. This threat of artillery in Ermatingen prompted Wolfgang von Fürstenberg to lead a major attack on the village to capture the two weapons.⁵⁸

Early in the morning of 11 April, Fürstenberg moved his men by boat on the Rhine River and overland to strike the Swiss garrison when it started to awaken. The leader of the Bernese, Hans Kuttler, and the commander of the men from Fribourg, Jacky Henni, were close friends and were up talking early in the morning before the rest of the men had risen. An alarm sounded, and the two leaders went to see what was happening to find the Swabians attacking the village from the rear. The Swiss tried to organize some resistance, but the enemy advance was too quick and heavy for the Swiss to get into formation. Some were cut down trying to dress or grab their weapons, and the master of the cannon (*Büchsenmeister*), Rüdolf Hass, from Luzern was stabbed to death. Some of the men from Ermatingen rushed to help the garrison, but the Swabians began shouting, "Flee, all is lost, alas dear Confederates!" At that moment, the Swiss ran away leaving seventy-three dead, most of whom were killed while still in bed.

The Swabians took Ermatingen, Triboltingen, and Mannenbach. Flushed with success a German leader, Burckhart von Randeck, a noted Swiss-hater, called for the destruction of the Swiss villages and swore to destroy many enemy areas that day. The Swabians fell out for plunder, and the men from the Hegau began to take their revenge. In Ermatingen some people fled to a church for refuge, but the building was burned and thirty-seven people were killed in it. Many others, including women and children, were killed and the possessions of even small children and sick people were taken. Women, children, and the elderly were abused in various ways, and women and young girls were raped. The three villages were held for three hours before their destruction was complete. On leaving, the Swabians filled the houses with straw and set them on fire. Loaded with plunder, the Germans began to trek back to Constance.

The Swiss fled until they felt safe and then reorganized themselves into good order. For the two leaders, the defeat was hard to bear. In their shame and misery, they cried they had lost their manliness. Eager to avenge themselves, they called for the militia to be assembled. Bells rang and

⁵⁷Lenz, pp. 57 & 63. The major sources on Schwaderloh include, Anashelm, *Chronik*, 2: 163-9; Lenz, pp. 63-74; and Brennwald, 2: 396-402.

⁵⁸Lenz, p. 64.

fires were lit as signals for the men to assemble at the church in Schwaderloh. The militia arrived and the situation was explained to them in emotional speeches in which the men were warned that they were in danger of losing face for all time. With the contingents from Bern and Fribourg, the total forces numbered about fifteen hundred. They were all placed into good order under the command of Kuttler and Henni and then marched through a forest on the way to Ermatingen. The Swiss remained in formation despite the thick trees when they received word that their enemies were withdrawing with their booty. Their leaders decided to attack immediately. The Swiss knelt in prayer, arose, and advanced from the forest to meet the Swabians near Triboltingen.

The Swabians left two cannon to protect their rear when they retreated, but these artillery pieces were poorly aimed. When the Swiss came out of the forest, the weapons shot too high. The cannon were soon taken, but their smoke momentarily obscured the field. Neither force could see the other as the Swiss continued their advance past the cannon to fall upon the Germans. The Swabian infantry was in two groups and were only interested in escape. The Swiss shouted their battle cry, a Swabian flag carrier broke in flight, and the rest of the infantry followed offering no resistance. Only the knights turned to meet the attacking Swiss, but the cavalry's stand was unsuccessful. It soon joined the flight. The Bernese and men from Fribourg began to take their revenge for the morning's skirmish.

At this juncture, on source said that the action became too confusing to record accurately. The Swabians dropped their plunder, weapons, and flags and fled overland and to their boats. The vessels soon became so full that they sank, drowning many men. Others also died in the Rhine trying to swim over the river, and many fled all that day and the next night. The Swiss pursued, killing any German they could overtake, and hunting down and dispatching those they found hiding in the forests.⁵⁹

The Swiss reported thirteen hundred Swabian dead on the field and eighty more bodies fished out of the Rhine. The Swiss admitted to a loss of twenty men in the battle, including one old man.⁶⁰ Soon after the engagement, priests and women, many of them wives of the missing, came to look among the dead for their loved ones. The captured enemy leaders were treated well, and those not held for ransom were soon sent to Constance after a prisoner exchange had been arranged. Some of the Swabian dead were buried in the field where they had fallen, but most of them were left to rot where they lay to be devoured by birds and wild animals.⁶¹

The remarkable feature of this battle was that the members of the militia had no idea they would participate in a major engagement when they awoke that morning. They started the day as they would any other, but within hours they had formed themselves into an army complete with

⁵⁹Büchi, p. 587.

⁶⁰Lenz, p. 69 and Anshelm, 2: 168. Swiss reports of casualties are usually considered to be quite accurate, reportedly being based on body counts following the battle. However, chroniclers often rounded out these numbers.

⁶¹Lenz, pp. 73-4 and Brennwald 2: 402.

weapons, armor, leaders, and battle formations capable of immediate and effective campaigning. It was no wonder that it was virtually impossible to invade Swiss territories at this time because an effective military organization was always on hand on a moment's notice.

The next major engagement, the battle of Frastanz, was the result of the Swiss and the men of Graubünden trying to remove an important base of operations from the men of Tirol. The Austrians had constructed fortifications across a mountain pass near Frastanz just north of modern Liechtenstein. From behind these walls of wood and stone, the Habsburg forces launched raiding expeditions into areas controlled by the Swiss and their close allies, the Graubündeners. When the allied army was unable to draw the Tirolese from their defenses, it was decided that their positions would have to be stormed.

The most influential leader among the Swiss who were involved in the operation was Heini Wolleb, leader of the small contingent of fifty men from Uri. Under his urging, it was decided that the enemy position could best be taken by attacks from the front and flank. But the attack on the side could only be launched by a force that had to climb a nearby mountain called the Royaberg. Wolleb led the column of roughly two thousand men who ascended the steep slopes, while Ulrich von Hohensax commanded the larger body of men who attacked the Austrian positions from the front.

Early on the morning of 20 April, Wolleb led his men on the ascent of the Royaberg. The incline was steep, but Wolleb, always the disciplinarian, was able to keep his men in such a compact order that there was concern that the men would inadvertently wound one another with their weapons. On top of the mountain, Wolleb's column met several hundred men wielding medieval muskets called harquebuses. When it became obvious that these opponents were going to release a volley, Wolleb ordered his men to fall to the ground, and the shots boomed harmlessly overhead. Before the Tirolese could reload, they were chased down the mountain.

The leader from Uri and his contingent followed the fleeing Austrians down the slope in an attempt to fall upon the left flank of the imperial forces. At the same time, the column under Hohensax advanced against the position of the Tirolese. It is unclear just where these attacking Swiss first engaged their adversaries, and the two groups may well have united before the final advance. But Wolleb and his forces clearly led the attack. Once again, these men faced the harquebuses of the Austrians, and once again Wolleb ordered his troops to fall to the ground to avoid taking the full force of enemy fire. After two volleys, Wolleb led the advance, and the rout of the Austrians was almost instantaneous. Among the few Swiss fatalities was Wolleb himself who fell fatally wounded after he was shot through the neck.⁶²

With the penetration of the Austrian positions and the flight of the infantry, the battle was still undecided. A large force of cavalry was at hand which conceivably could have reversed the trend of the battle had it attacked when the Swiss broke ranks after crossing the Tirolese defenses. One knight

⁶²Pirckheimer p. 86 wrote that Wolleb died in an identical manner as Arnold von Winkelried's supposed demise at the battle of Sempach. The Uri leader grasped the pikes of the enemy allowing his men to rush through an opening thus formed in the enemy ranks.

attempted to fall upon the Swiss, but the remainder refused to follow him. The cavalry soon left the scene without striking a blow. The battle ended with the Swiss killing as many Austrians as possible as they attempted to flee.⁶³

The loss of Wolleb, a brilliant tactical innovator, proved to be a grave blow to the Swiss war effort because he was not available to argue for his practice of ordering his men to fall down in the face of enemy fire. He had shown that such maneuvers were very successful, since a man either prone on the ground or on all fours made a much smaller target. Possibly, the heavy casualties the Swiss received in the battles of Calven next month and at Marignano and Brescia early in the next century could have been avoided if Wolleb's tactical alterations had been in use.

The best sources available indicated that the battles of Schwerloh and Frastanz were won at a very low cost in casualties. Neither battle had claimed more than a score of Swiss fatalities, while the losses by their enemies could be counted in the hundreds. The Confederates were less fortunate at Calven where they suffered heavy casualties.

The problems facing the Swiss at Calven were virtually identical to those at Frastanz. The Austrians had fortified a narrow mountain valley from which they staged a series of raids into areas controlled by Graubünden. When it became clear that the men of the Grey League had insufficient strength to stop these forays, they called upon the Confederation for help, and a large army soon arrived to help them. The most reliable sources reported that these combined forces numbered over eight thousand troops.⁶⁴

The plan of attack was also similar to that used at Frastanz. A large force was to climb over the steep valley walls to attack the enemy from the rear. If successful, these troops could take enough men from the defenses to allow these positions to be easily stormed. The battle plan was sound, but faulty execution would cost the Swiss and their allies dearly. The flanking column was composed of between 2,000 and 3,000 men under the combined leadership of Wilhem von Ringk and Niclaus von Lumbrins. Starting shortly after midnight on 22 May, these columns began an ascent of thirty-six hundred feet and a march of roughly ten miles to bring them in a position at the enemy's rear at dawn. The feat was performed on time, and a building was set on fire to signal the rest of the army that it was time to attack.

The Austrians were not caught entirely off guard because they had stood watch at their positions night and day for the past three days. But the appearance of a large force at their rear surprised many of them, and the first group sent to meet the Swiss flanking column was easily routed. However, the imperial army sent sufficient men to hold the *Marengbrücke* (Mareng bridge) over which the Swiss had to advance to strike the Austrian positions from the rear. Despite the repeated

⁶³For sources on Frastanz, see Pirckheimer, pp. 84-7; "Heinrich [Amman] Hauptmann der Bündner an Cur," 20 April and "Luzern an Freiburg," 22 April 1499 as cited in Büchi 149-50 and 152-3 respectively; Anshelm, 2: 169-72; Brennwald, 2: 404; and Lenz, pp. 110-14.

⁶⁴Johann Stumpf as cited in Jecklin and Jecklin, *Anteil Graubündens*, p. 34.

attacks that lasted for five hours, the Swiss were unable to break through. They lost both Ringk and Lumbrins and suffered hundreds of other casualties, all to no avail.

While the position of the flanking column became precarious, the main body of the Swiss and their allies had delayed its advance. The leader from Schwyz, Dietrich Freuler, convinced the other leaders, Benedikt Fontana and Hartwig Capauls, that it was wise to delay the attack in the hope that the Austrian fortifications would be abandoned due to the pressure of the flanking column. It was midday before the main army was divided into three battle formations and advanced on the Austrian positions.

From the start, the Swiss and men of Graubünden suffered heavily from enemy fire. Artillery and harquebuses both took a large toll as the Confederates attempted to storm the Austrian positions. Despite the numerous casualties, several assaults were thrown against the imperial position until a final attack, in which Benedikt Fontana was killed, was successful. The enemy positions were stormed, and the Austrians fled.⁶⁵ This rout also decided the engagement at the Mareng bridge because the Tirolese there ran for their lives as well.

Eager for revenge for their heavy casualties, the Swiss and men of Graubünden ruthlessly killed any of the enemy who fell into their hands. When the battle ended, it was reported that the Swiss and their allies had suffered 2,000 dead, and the Austrians had lost 4,000 men.⁶⁶ Once again, many of the imperial losses could be blamed on the cavalry which stood idly by while the infantry was defeated. The costly outcome of the battle was insufficient to appease some of the Swiss, and men from Graubünden. They decided to take out their wrath on the local populace as well because the area was under imperial control, and many believed that the people had aided the Austrians in their war effort. Seven villages were burned to the ground, and all the men over the age of twelve were killed. The entire area was plundered as well.⁶⁷

Calven was the most costly battle in Swiss history to that point. It clearly showed the folly of frontal attacks against artillery and harquebuses. But these lessons were soon forgotten, and the Swiss participation in the Italian wars in the years to come would show how misspent courage could lead to disaster. Calven was an object lesson which the Swiss failed to learn with tragic consequences.⁶⁸

Maximilian had suffered a number of reversals during the winter and spring of 1499, but he was hopeful that a successful invasion could be mounted in the summer that would bring the Confederation and Graubünden to favorable terms. Above all, Maximilian knew that he must strike

⁶⁵Dietrich Freuler did not do his duty as a leader but fled the scene in the confusion of battle. See Lenz, p. 117.

⁶⁶Lenz, p. 123.

⁶⁷Brennwald, 2: 422.

⁶⁸For sources on the battle of Calven, see Jecklin, which is largely a compilation of sources on the battle; Lenz, pp. 121-3; Brennwald, 2: 420-2; Pirckheimer, pp. 96-7; and "Hauptman und Räte von Cur im Felde an Cur," 22 May 1499 and "Landeshauptmann und Räte an der Etsch an Statthalter und Regenten zu Innsbruck," 23 May 1499 as cited in Büchi, pp. 222-3 and 234-5 respectively.

at once because even his strenuous efforts had provided insufficient funds to continue the war much longer. Only a successful and rapid campaign could supply enough booty to pay his troops. Maximilian planned to keep the Swiss attention focused on Constance by staging an elaborate diversion that appeared to be a major attack. While the Confederates continued to garrison positions near that city, a large army under the command of Heinrich von Fürstenberg would invade Swiss territories from the Sundgau which was an area of Alsace.

The plan seemed to be sound, but it suffered from several weaknesses. The attack from the Sundgau necessitated placing Basel at the rear of the army. While this city had declared its neutrality, it certainly had Swiss sentiments and was unreliable. The castle of Dorneck guarded the avenue of attack up the Birs valley and laying siege to this fortress would give the Swiss time to appraise the situation and take some definite action before the Confederation could be deeply penetrated. But most serious problem with this invasion was that it threatened Bern. Throughout the war, the Bernese state had been a lackluster ally. It feared Habsburg power little because it shared no border with imperial holdings, and it saw the Empire as a potential ally against the power of France which did threaten its borders. When Fürstenberg's army approached, the city was shaken into more decisive action and sent large contingents to meet the threat.

In May and June Fürstenberg assembled his army. It numbered between 10,000 and 15,000 men, but these troops varied much in quality. Many were simple conscripts who had little interest in the campaign or its outcome. Others were the superb *Landsknechte* from the Gelderland who were very able mercenaries. The cavalry consisted of eleven hundred of the feared and respected Welsh Guard from Burgundy. However, due to lack of pay, these knights were poorly motivated and proved to be largely ineffective in battle because its members were more interested in booty than in the war effort.

On the morning of 22 July, the first elements of Fürstenberg's army reached Dorneck. These units were the artillerymen who prepared to pound the castle into submission. As the rest of the army arrived, the men began to celebrate because 22 July was St. Mary Magdalene's Day. Dorneck had been purchased by Solothurn in 1490, and that city was very concerned about the possibility of an attack on the castle, but the garrison there comprised only twenty men. However, Solothurn kept writing to other members of the Confederation and finally convinced them that an attack from the Sundgau was much more likely than an operation from the city of Constance.⁶⁹ When the imperial army arrived, the Swiss had been gathering their forces for two days at the nearby village of Gempen.

The army under Fürstenberg's command did not realize that the Swiss were nearby, so few precautions were taken. From the Schartenfluh hill near Gempen, the mayor of Solothurn, Niklaus Conrad, observed the enemy frolicking near the villages of Arlesheim and Dornach. He was

⁶⁹See Eugen Tatarinoff, *Die Beteiligung Solothurn am Schwabenkriege bis zur Schlacht bei Dornach 22 Juli 1499* (Solothurn: A. Lüthy, 1899) for reproductions of the correspondence regarding the castle of Dorneck, Solothurn's preparations for defense, and the battle of Dornach.

convinced that if an immediate attack were made, the Swiss could achieve total surprise. By early afternoon, the confederate army near Gempen numbered 5,000 men including 3,000 Bernese who had arrived only hours before. Contingents from Luzern and Zug were still expected, but the opportunity for surprise was too tempting and an immediate attack was the consensus of the leaders.

The advance was to be led by a small formation comprised largely of men from Solothurn under the command of Conrad. This *Haufen* was to march directly on the cannon that had been placed to ward off a surprise attack if the Swiss decided to launch one. These men were then to do as much damage as possible until the main body of forces arrived to win the battle. Initially, everything went as planned. The cannon were taken before heavy damage could be inflicted on the attacking column, and nearly the entire army panicked. The men of Solothurn were most fortunate that they killed Fürstenberg in their initial attack thus depriving their opponents of their leader early in the contest.

At his point, however, the Swiss battle plan began to fall apart. The arrival of the main body of troops, the *Gewalthaufen* was delayed by heavy underbrush, and the imperial army was rallying to place the forces from Solothurn in grave danger. The timely arrival of the main force of the army saved Conrad and his men from certain annihilation, but the battle was far from over. The *Landsknechte* from the Gelderland were then on hand in a square formation identical to that of the Swiss. Wielding similar weapons and employing identical tactics of the adversaries, the mercenaries were able to fight the Swiss to a standstill.

For hours the two armies faced each other in an equal contest. Time after time, attacks were launched by the two forces that dented but never penetrated the opposing ranks. A rise in the center of the heavily contested battlefield has subsequently been known as "Blood Hill."⁷⁰ As dusk approached, it became probable that night would fall with no victory achieved by either side. With the strength of the *Landsknechte* unbroken, the main Swiss hope of achieving victory was the arrival of the men from Luzern and Zug. At dusk, these contingents numbering one thousand men arrived and joined with their allies for one final attack. The last advance proved to be successful as the mercenaries broke ranks and fled. Effective pursuit was nearly impossible because of the darkness and the exhausted state of the Swiss troops. After chasing their adversaries to the Birs creek, the fatigued Swiss laid down where they were and slept.⁷¹

⁷⁰Rieter, p. 148.

⁷¹For sources on the battle, see "Schlachtbulletin," 22 July 1499 and "Schlachtbulletin von Solothurn von Bern an Freiburg geschickt," 23 July 1499 as cited in Tartarinoff, *Solothurn ... [im] Schwabenkrieg*, pp. 132-3 and 133-4 respectively; Lenz, pp. 152-4; Brennwald, 2: 451-2; Anshelm, 2: 224-9; Etterlin, p. 250; and "Hauptleute etc., der Stadt Bern im Feld an Bern," 22 July 1499 and "Hauptleute etc., der Stadt Bern im Feld an Bern," 24 July 1499 as cited in Büchi, pp. 380-2 and 389-92 respectively.

The overall casualties for the battle gave small indication of how closely the fight was contested. Perhaps the most reliable report on the losses in the battle indicated that 500 Swiss died, while 3,000 from the imperial army fell.⁷² But the sources did not indicate what was the casualty ratio in the lengthy engagement between the Confederates and *Landsknechte* during the afternoon.

Many of the Swiss looked upon the victory at Dornach in social terms and reveled over the fact that a number of men from the elite had been killed in battle. After the engagement, the Swiss bragged, "We are the peasants who punish the nobles."⁷³ Also following this battle, emissaries from Basel came to the victorious Swiss and requested that the bodies of the highest nobles killed in the battle be allowed to be taken from the field for proper burial. The Swiss simply replied that "the nobles must remain with the poor [men] and could well bury themselves."⁷⁴ But the bodies of three of the most powerful nobles, including Heinrich von Fürstenberg, were taken to Dornach for burial in the church there.⁷⁵

The frequency of military campaigning declined rapidly after the battle of Dornach, as both sides were nearly exhausted, and, clearly, Maximilian had failed in his attempt to subjugate the Swiss Confederation. Negotiations for a peace agreement soon followed, and the peace was signed at Basel on 22 September 1499 which formally ended the war. In the Peace of Basel, Maximilian, recognized no further authority to tax or place courts over the Swiss.⁷⁶ In all practical terms, this meant that the Confederation was independent of the influence of the Empire. The loss of the Swiss was hardly the death knell for the chances of unity in the Empire, but the war clearly demonstrated the weaknesses of Maximilian's plans for the creation of a German state.

This autonomous status for the Swiss was hardly new since the their states had long showed little interest in imperial affairs, thus indicating they virtual independence. Yet the war was significant in defining the nature of the Confederation for centuries to come. Recognizing that a closer association with the Swiss was in their best interests, Basel and Solothurn formerly joined the Confederation in 1501. Appenzell would join in 1513 which would be the last acquisition for three centuries until six more cantons entered in 1803, and three others became members in 1815.⁷⁷ While there were many turbulent times in the coming centuries including the era of the Reformation and fear that the Thirty' Years War would include the Swiss, the era of foreign invasion was almost

⁷²"*Wir sind die buren die den adel strafend*" "Bern im Feld an Bern," 24 July 1499 as cited in Büchi, pp. 389-92.

⁷³Anshelm, 2: 253.

⁷⁴"*Die edelen müssen bi den puren beliben und konnens wol selbst vergraben.*" "Hauptleute etc. der Stadt Bern im Felde an Bern," 24 July 1499 as cited in Büchi, p. 391.

⁷⁵"Solothurner Hauptleute an Solothurn," 26 July 1499 as cited in Büchi, p. 395.

⁷⁶Kurz, *Schweizerschlachten*, p. 178.

⁷⁷St. Gallen, Graubünden, Aargau, Thurgau, Ticino, and Vaud joined in 1803, while Valais Neuchâtel, and Geneva became members in 1815.

entirely over for the Confederation which was able to create its own national identity. Perhaps more important than this development was the stunning example the Swiss had set by showing the vigor and resourcefulness of a free people successfully defending their rights and privileges at the close of the Middle Ages.



Fig. . Urs Graf, *Reisläufer mit Langspiess und Schwert* (Mercenary with spear and sword), pen drawing, 21.8 x 16.1 cm, 1514. Basel Public Art Collection, Copper Engraving Collection. Photograph Basel Public Art Collection.