

Napoleon's Swiss Troops



D Greentree & D Campbell • Illustrated by G & S Embleton

Men-at-Arms • 476

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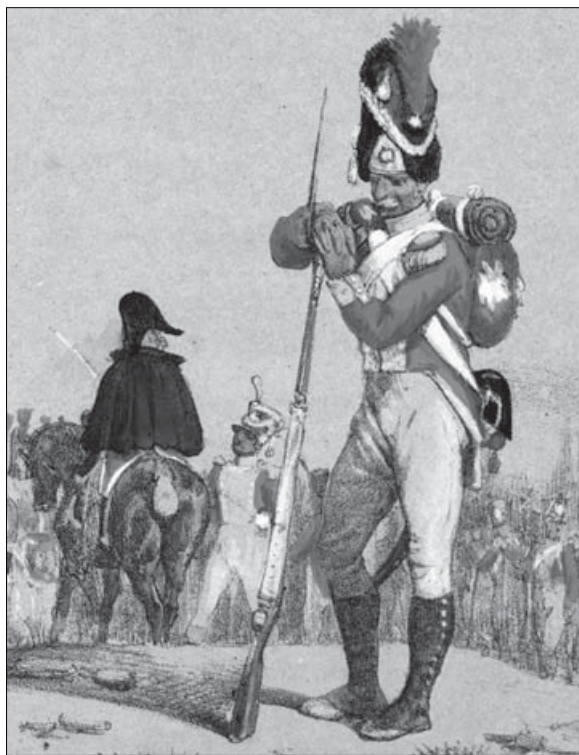
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Series editor Martin Windrow

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INTRODUCTION

Grenadier of the 1st Swiss Regt, 1812 – compare with Plate C2. The achievements of the Swiss in the Napoleonic Wars were perhaps unsurpassed by those of any other allied contingent except the Poles. Marshal Gouvion St Cyr described them in Russia: 'They were invincible right to the end; they outdid nature, and they spread a radiance of heroism over this desert of snow.' (Lami, courtesy Yves Martin)



Switzerland's strategic importance had been recognized since ancient times, when the 2nd century BC Roman politician Cato described its mountain ranges as an 'impregnable barrier that defends Italy like a rampart.' However, in medieval times they became less of a hindrance to movement between north and south, since by the 13th century a handful of mountain passes had become usable in summer. These passes – the Great St Bernard, Simplon, and St Gothard – allowed passage between Italy, France and Germany via Lucerne, Berne and Zurich. By the 15th century they had become important trade routes, which also allowed hardy mercenaries from the confederation of independent-minded Swiss cantons to travel both north and south to hire out their skills. It was this culture of sturdy independence that dictated the Confederation's relations with foreign powers – originally the Habsburgs, then the Dukes of Burgundy, and, eventually, Napoleon.

Ever since the 15th century France had been importing Swiss professional soldiers to serve as mercenaries. Through their reliability and their accomplishments on the battlefield the Swiss secured a reputation that made them a popular choice for commanders and monarchs over the next 300 years. By the end of the 18th century Swiss soldiers were serving in the armies of several European countries; Spain, Holland, and Piedmont-Sardinia all employed contingents of several thousands, but France had always been their largest employer. By 1791 two Swiss Guard regiments and 11 Swiss line regiments were on the French establishment, and since the 1780s the absolutist French royal regime had already started to rely on its Swiss regiments for internal security. Swiss soldiers, with few ties to the local populace, were more reliable than their French counterparts in facing riotous mobs, and this duty – together with their special privileges and high pay – made them particularly resented.

In 1789, as well as the two Swiss Guard regiments based in the capital, four Swiss line regiments were summoned when French units – including the French Guard regiments – started to disintegrate. However, by the summer of 1792 the Swiss Guard was the only military unit in the capital, and King Louis XVI relied on them for his safety in the

Tuileries Palace. On 10 August a crowd numbering in the tens of thousands approached the palace, insisting that the king be brought before the National Assembly. With no option but to comply, Louis asked the Swiss to lay down their arms. The Swiss instinctively refused, and (witnessed by Napoleon) staunchly resisted the mob that rampaged through the courtyards of the palace. Of 800 Swiss Guards in Paris that day only 200 escaped; the rest were hunted down, and either killed on the spot or dragged off to prison and murdered a few days later. After this massacre the Swiss Diet ordered the withdrawal of all its regiments from France.

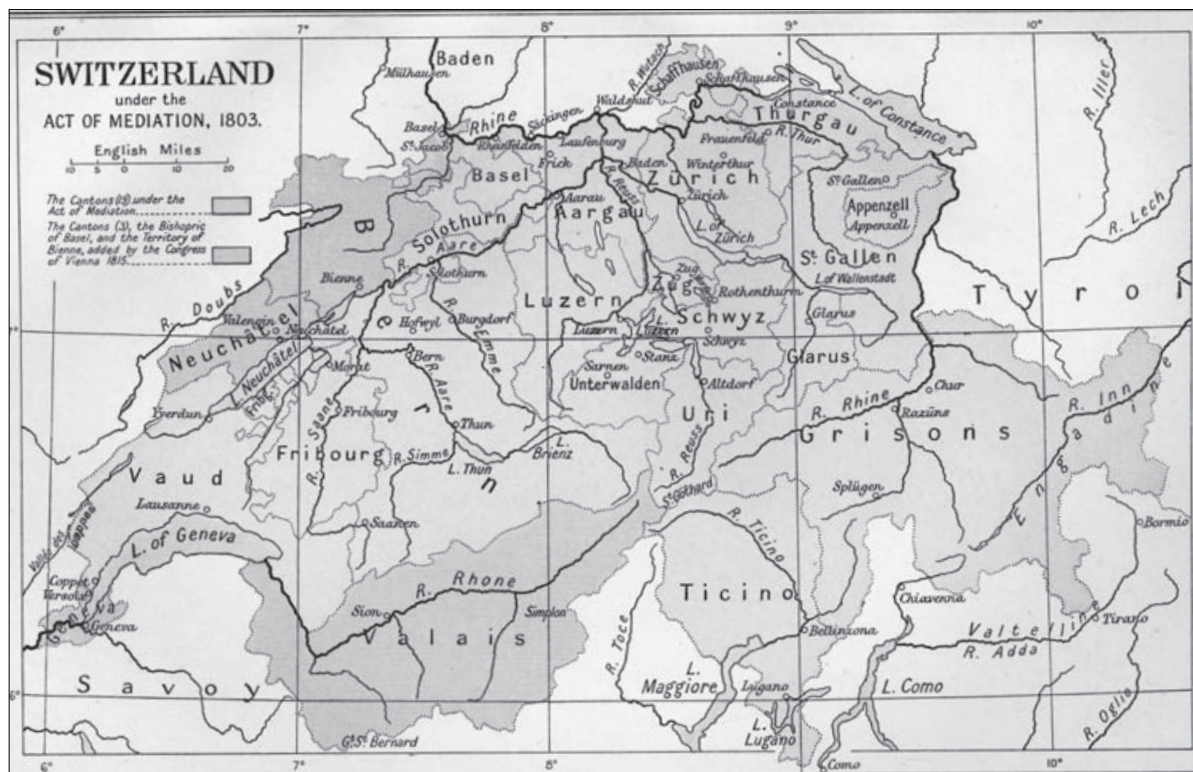
The impact of the Revolution

In principle, the new French Republic viewed the service of foreigners in the defence of France as anathema, and all foreign regiments were disbanded – but in practice, the new regime could not afford to dispense with their services. The more realistic of their leaders were acutely aware that trained professional soldiers were required as a backbone for the huge citizen army that the Republic was raising, and Swiss were encouraged to enlist in French regiments. Some 3,000 to 4,000 volunteered; moreover, the absence of wholly Swiss regiments from the French Army was to be short-lived.

In 1798–1800 Switzerland itself became a battlefield, as both France and her enemies sought to exploit the country's geographical position as the hinge between the German and Italian theatres of operations. In 1798 revolutionary sentiments disturbed the Swiss cantons themselves, providing a catalyst for foreign intervention. Since 1648, when the Treaty of Westphalia had guaranteed the independence of the Swiss Confederation, only a select oligarchy had wielded any real political power in the cantons. The working classes frequently revolted in search of greater political and economic freedoms, and after the French Revolution ideas of equal rights found a warm reception in parts of Switzerland. In early 1798, a French army invaded Switzerland ostensibly to protect activists who were intent on replacing the cantonal confederation with a republic, and organized resistance – centred on the regions around Berne – was quickly overcome. On 29 March the Helvetian Republic was inaugurated; ruled from its capital in Lucerne, this entity was a puppet government foisted on the cantons by the French Directory.

Austrian and Russian intervention quickly followed, and both sides sought to recruit Swiss soldiers into their military forces. In November 1798 the Directory ordered the Helvetian Republic to provide men for six *demi-brigades* within the French Army. On 4 September 1798, for internal security, the Helvetian Republic had established a small, permanent, all-arms force called the Helvetian Legion, and on 13 December it introduced cantonal militia battalions.

General Napoleon Bonaparte, who returned from his failed Egyptian adventure that October, carried out in November the *coup d'état* that made him 'First Consul' and virtual dictator of France, and by 1800 Switzerland was firmly in France's orbit. Napoleon initially supported the expansion of the Helvetian Legion into a regular army, separately from the Swiss units in the French Army. However, his efforts to impose a centralized government structure on Switzerland were extremely unpopular. The concept of a federal state made up of autonomous cantons was too firmly rooted in their culture, and an open revolt in



1802 persuaded Napoleon that forcing the republican model upon them was more trouble than it was worth. He conceded to a Swiss delegation that ‘the more I studied the geography, history and the customs of your country, the more I realized that the Swiss people should not be subjected to a [central] government and to uniform laws.’ On 27 September, in exchange for a restored Helvetian Confederation, the majority of Swiss deputies agreed to a 50-year defensive alliance with France. The price demanded for this included a commitment to find 16,000 soldiers for the French Army, and an additional 8,000 troops in the event of any invasion of France. The regular Helvetian Legion would be disbanded.

Between 1805 and 1807 four regiments of Swiss troops, each of four battalions, were raised for the French Army, taking the place of the former demi-brigades. Additionally, the Swiss regions of Valais and Neuchâtel (though neither was then part of the Confederation) each contributed a battalion for French service. Napoleon recognized that professional Swiss soldiers were more suited to some military tasks than French conscripts, and the recruitment of foreign units slightly lessened the burden of that conscription on his own countrymen. From the records held at Vincennes, the historian Tornare has calculated that from 1805 to 1813 a total of 30,526 recruits enlisted in the Swiss regiments and the Valais and Neuchâtel battalions: 7,546 for the 1st Swiss Regiment, 8,501 for the 2nd, 7,189 for the 3rd, 7,290 for the 4th, and a total of 2,323 for the Valais and Neuchâtel battalions.

Then and since, some British accounts have mistakenly dismissed these troops as ‘unreliable mercenaries’, able to contribute little more than garrison units that released French soldiers for field campaigns.

On 19 February 1803, by the Act of Mediation, Switzerland was confirmed as a mosaic of small cantons each with their own laws, currency and police. They sent deputies to a national Diet in Fribourg; the head of state – the Landamann – changed every year, being drawn in rotation from the six largest cantons. Valais was independent from the Helvetian Confederation, and Neuchâtel was initially a Prussian possession; however, both would soon provide troops for Napoleon. (Maproom.org)