

Marignano

(Article on the history)

Marignano - an old version of the name of the Italian town of Melegnano - was a battle outside of the city walls of Milan that took place on 13 and 14 September 1515. Roughly 30'000 men of a French army confronted maybe 20'000 Swiss Confederate warriors. The great number of soldiers involved and the fact that for the last time the sheer physical strength of men armed with long pikes and halberds - immortalized in the drawings of Urs Graf - has been almost decisive, made the Condottiere Gian Giacomo Trivulzio, who took part in the fight, call it *The Battle of Giants*.

"Trivulzio, the Captain who had seen so much, confirmed that this had not been a battle of men, but of giants, and the eighteen battles in which he had participated were children's battles compared to this one." (Francesco Guiccardini, History of Italy, volume 12, chapter 15)

Among the contemporary historians who have dealt with Marignano, the dean of Swiss military history, Walter Schaufelberger, is the most important one. With his masterly study *"Marignano. Structural Limits of Swiss Federal Military Power between Middle Ages and Modern Times"*, published in 1993, he set the standard.

There shouldn't even have been a battle in 1515. Not a week before the encounter, Swiss and French negotiators had concluded at Gallarate a treaty, providing for Swiss withdrawal from Milan in exchange of important French payments. When the warriors' assemblies from Uri, Schwyz and Glarus rejected this treaty, they were, together with other members of the army who were against the proposal, left to their fate in Milan by the accepting cantons of Bern, Freiburg and Solothurn. The state structures of the late Middle Ages Confederation were tested to their limits by the attempt to become a big power: Either one changed against all resistance the structure towards greater centralization or one withdrew to one's own territory. The latter indeed happened after the defeat.

The Swiss were incited by the very active Cardinal Matthäus Schiner, born himself from the Swiss valley of Wallis and a passionate opponent of the French, to attack, from inside the city, the French King François I who had

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many artillery guns. On the afternoon and evening of 13 September the Swiss warriors seemed, however, to win the battle. The field was limited - in the direction of the attack - on the right by the old Roman canal Vettabia, on the left by the river Lambro running parallel to the canal. Numerous side-ditches rendered approaching the enemy difficult, especially when he had placed his guns behind them in file. The French, with maybe 300 guns of all kinds, were far superior to the Swiss in this regard. Thanks to this superiority they could on both days impede a Swiss breakthrough in direction of the Lambro bridge at Melegnano ahead of Santa Brera - the headquarters of the French King in the nowadays *Parco Agricolo Sud Milano* - and proceed to counterattack.

Since they had held the Lambro bridge on 13 September, the French could on the following day join forces with the fresh troops paid by Venice and led by the Condottiere Bartolomeo d'Alviano. Due to this reinforcement they gained superiority and forced the Swiss to withdraw. The

Confederates retreated slowly and in perfect order, as the famous painting by Ferdinand Hodler reminds us. On the battlefield itself, nasty scenes could be observed, not last due to the economic competition between Swiss warriors and German mercenaries: war showed its ugly face. Switzerland, France and the world had, however, changed forever by nightfall of 14 September 1515. Not even the battle noise has faded: it will be heard as long as the music of Clément Janequin is played.

Marignano gave the Confederation the most important impulse towards orienting her foreign policy towards neutrality, a move which proved to be a great blessing. That's what the Latin inscription on the monument at Zivido means: "*Out of Defeat Salvation*", EX CLADE SALUS. The defeat also dampened former Confederate enthusiasm for foreign rulers and their shining offers, for foreign military service and for war altogether. Thus, it also laid a founding stone for the success of church reform and its criticism of mercenary service at Zurich and far beyond. Another central result was the Confederates now refused to cede the Sottoceneri, the southernmost region of Switzerland, to the French, as the Treaty of Gallarate still had foreseen. Marignano therefore also very directly lies at the origins of the Italian speaking Canton of Ticino that we know and love since 1803 but whose valleys have been Swiss by half a millennium.

The French victor, King François I, triumphantly ordered a medal to be struck that announced to the world his defeat of the Helvetians who had lost out before only to Julius Caesar: VICI AB UNO CAESARE VICTOS. François I, who in death wanted to be surrounded by the Marignano scenes the sculptor Pierre Bontemps had created for his grave monument at Saint-Denis, was in life smart enough to offer his valiant opponents a favorable peace already in 1516. In 1521 he concluded with them another treaty providing for Swiss mercenaries in French service. Both treaties, even if later modified many fold and at times hanging by a thin thread, were the base for a French-Swiss peace that lasted continuously from 1516 until 1798. Even after 1815 the fond memories of later generations helped preserving Gallo-Helvetian good neighbouring and friendship for another two hundred years. The French respect for the opponent who had fought bravely was shared by the Venetians who had won alongside the French. From this moment and as long as her own republic lasted, Venice looked at republican Switzerland with obvious sympathy.

In Lombardy, the Swiss ended up fighting on the side of the legitimate Duke of Milan, Massimiliano Sforza, to whose parents Ludovico il Moro and Beatrice d'Este is dedicated the most famous among the splendid grave monuments at the Certosa di Pavia. Marignano thus also confirmed the good relationship between the Confederation and Milan, by far the most important city near her borders. At the international level, Marignano, by reducing the Swiss Confederation to a small power, opened the way for French-Habsburg confrontation in Lombardy, an antagonism that should lead to military eruptions until the battle of Solferino in 1859. In a way, it definitely became history only in 1945, after the two World Wars.

As it happens to all great battles, each period knows to use Marignano for its purposes: as illustration for the unstoppable technical progress in warfare, as origin of Swiss neutrality, as the object of songs, sculptures and paintings, as welcome reason for commemorative celebrations, as important chapter of Lombard history, as object for the destruction of old myths and for the creation of new ones, as proof of the uselessness of man's actions in this world, as confirmation of the importance of a family, a diocese, a village or a mere hamlet. In all this, there is something true and legitimate. It will take a while, but the day will come when a large majority will accept pluralism of all historical explanations as cultural wealth uniting peoples and not as threat to one's own political views. If this enlightened state should be reached in the shadow of the chapel of Zivido a little earlier than elsewhere, we will owe this to Swiss and Italian pioneers such as Pierino Esposti, Roland Haudenschild and David Vogelsanger. With their selfless work and can-do attitude they have created out of a deed of arms that occurred five hundred years ago an expression of the

ideal left to us by our great poet Gottfried Keller: Friendship in Freedom.

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