

# The Alpine Campaign of 1799 as a Stepping Stone to a Doctrine of Mountain Warfare

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**Abstract.** The Russian Imperial Army fought for the first time in the mountains in 1799, when Alexander Suvorov led his corps from Italy across the Swiss Alps to join the Russian forces at Zurich and expel the French Army from Switzerland. His soldiers were skilled professionals who had won an impressive series of battles in Italy against the French. Suvorov did not anticipate problems in the Alps, being convinced that he would easily sweep away the small French garrisons deployed on his way. Yet, because of inexperience in mountain warfare, Suvorov's corps struggled against enormous strategic, tactical, and logistical challenges, lost half of its manpower and failed to attain its goals. The Swiss trek shows that mountain warfare defies amateurism, dilettantism and spontaneity. Even though mountains are located on the verges of Russia, the Russian and then Soviet armies ignored the peculiarities of mountain warfare and fought every new campaign in the mountains the same way they would fight on the plains, with predictably dire consequences.

Until the end of the 18th century the Russian Army had fought only on plains. The campaign against France in the Swiss Alps launched by General Alexander Suvorov in 1799 was Russia's first action in the mountains. As Clausewitz states, "Historical examples ... provide the best kind of proof in the empirical sciences", which "is particularly true about the art of war"; therefore, "the detailed presentation of a historical event ... make[s] it possible to deduce a doctrine."<sup>1</sup> This article furnishes arguments

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<sup>1</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 170, 171.

in support of this idea and emphasises the value of historical examples for diversifying war practice. It reveals the scope of the strategic, tactical, and logistical challenges Suvorov faced in the Alps and shows the volume of data about actions in the mountains available to the Russian General Staff as a result of this experience. Knowledge distilled from combat reports and numerous memoirs and studies would have been sufficient to assess the peculiarities of mountain warfare and make first steps towards the development of its doctrine, most of which would have been valid even at present. The article also shows how field research can facilitate the critical assessment of data provided by primary and secondary sources. I walked along Suvorov's entire route across the Swiss Alps, and this experiment allowed me to grasp some of the challenges experienced by soldiers, often imperceptible in combat records; it also helped me assess the credibility of the available sources, clarify ambiguous statements and dismiss some allegations; and as a result draw what I would argue are uniquely accurate charts most of which are published for the first time in this article.

## Context

In 1792–1797, the French revolutionary armies repelled the invasions of several great powers; the First Coalition admitted its defeat by signing a series of peace treaties. However, a year later France demonstrated its ambitions for a far-reaching expansion by launching an expedition to Egypt and landing in Malta; France then exploited internal turmoil in Switzerland to occupy it. The European monarchs decided to put an end to the atheist troublemaker who challenged the entire order of Europe – the balance of power, the existing borders, the dominant ideologies and the established social systems. This challenge convinced these monarchs that “the revolutionary regime was simply insatiable and that its elimination by military means was the only solution”.<sup>2</sup> By January 1799, Austria, Britain and Russia assembled the Second Coalition against France. They

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<sup>2</sup> T. C. W. Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars* (London: Arnold, 1996), 228, 229.

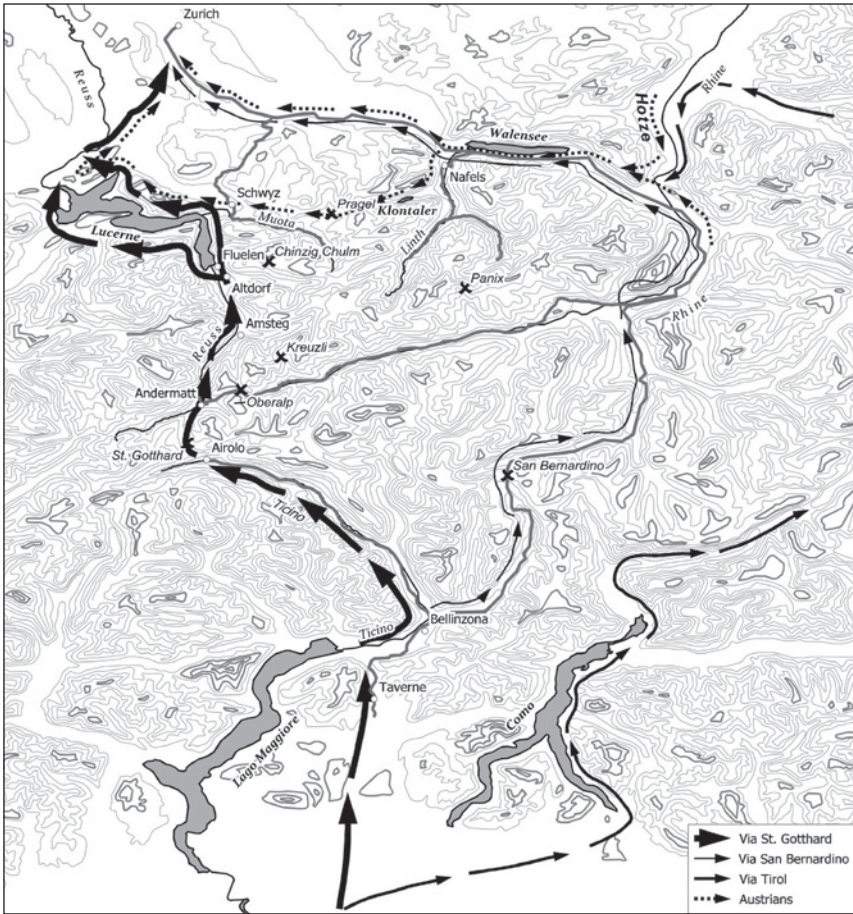


Figure 1. Options examined by Suvorov on the eve of the Swiss Campaign. This and all the other maps are author's original drawings

planned to expel the French Army from Switzerland in the following summer.

The allied forces were split between a Russian corps of 27,116 men, commanded by Alexander Rimskij-Korsakov that had arrived recently to Zurich from Russia, and four Austrian formations, totalling 22,138 men, that were scattered along a 150 kilometre-long crescent between the Walensee and the Rhine valley and were under the overall com-

mand of Field Marshal Friedrich von Hotze.<sup>3</sup> The seven French divisions in Switzerland, commanded by General André Masséna, numbered about 60,000 men.<sup>4</sup> Before launching an offensive against the French, the allies had to fuse their forces.<sup>5</sup> To compensate for the numerical superiority of the French, they decided to bring the Russian corps of 21,286 men<sup>6</sup>, deployed in Italy, to northern Switzerland across the Alps. This force, commanded by Suvorov, consisted of professional and battle-hardened soldiers who had scored several victories over the French. Suvorov was to meet the Austrians as his troops exited the Alps in Schwyz, and then the allies would march to Zurich to join Korsakov. He did not anticipate serious problems along this 150-kilometre route in mid-September. He soon learned that the “fog of uncertainty” was thicker and the “friction of war”<sup>7</sup> more severe in the mountains than on the plains.

## Plan

Suvorov planned to begin his march at Taverner, a Swiss town close to the Italian border. He considered three routes across the Alps (Figure 1). The shortest way to Korsakov began along a good road in the Ticino valley and then proceeded along a good pack trail that was, however, inaccessible to carts or artillery, across St. Gotthard Pass (2,106 m) into the Reuss valley. A good road led along the valley to Altdorf at Lake Lucerne. From there, Suvorov planned to march along either bank of the lake to Schwyz

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<sup>3</sup> Dmitrij Miljutin (Милютин, Дмитрий), *Istorija vojny 1799 goda meždu Rossiej i Franciej* (История войны 1799 года между Россией и Францией) (St. Petersburg: Imperatorskaja Akademija Nauk, 1857), vol. 3, 471. Phipps states that Korsakov's corps had 29,463 soldiers, Ramsay Phipps, *The Armies of the First French Republic* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), vol. 5, 127.

<sup>4</sup> Phipps, *The Armies of the First French Republic*, vol. 5, 128, 129; M. Bogdanovič (Богданович, М.), *Poxody Suvorova v Italii i Švejcarii* (Походы Суворова в Италии и Швейцарии) (St. Petersburg: Voennaja tipografija, 1846), 152.

<sup>5</sup> V. Lopatin (Лопатин, В.), ed., *A. V. Suvorov: Piš'ma* (А. В. Суворов: Письма) (Moscow: Nauka, 1986), 731.

<sup>6</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 3, 476.

<sup>7</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 101, 119.

or directly to Zurich.<sup>8</sup> The second route, which crossed San Bernardino Pass, was longer. Although accessible to carts and artillery, it led to the Austrian allies, in eastern Switzerland, rather than to Korsakov.<sup>9</sup> The third route, much longer but easier, led along Como Lake and Tyrol, again to the Austrian allies rather than to Korsakov.

Suvorov chose the first route because he hurried to join Korsakov before the French could concentrate their forces against him. Suvorov knew that no French formations were deployed along the second and third routes, whereas two brigades of the French division commanded by General Claude Lecourbe, with a total strength of 8,000 to 8,500 men,<sup>10</sup> were scattered all the way between St. Gotthard and Altdorf along the first route. However, this did not worry Suvorov because his corps enjoyed an overwhelming numerical superiority, which was further enhanced by two Austrian brigades. One of them, with 4,000 to 4,500 men commanded by Gottfried Strauch, was to join his army at the beginning of the march, while the other, with a strength of 2,000 to 2,500 men commanded by Franz Auffenberg, was to come from the Rhine valley to Amsteg, halfway between St. Gotthard and Altdorf into the rear of the French defenders of St. Gotthard, thus facilitating Suvorov's advance.<sup>11</sup> Suvorov sent all of his artillery via the third route but acquired from Piedmont 25 small two-pounder mountain guns that could be transported on horseback.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "Dispozicija A. V. Suvorova" – A. V. Suvorov, ed. G. Meščerjakov (Мещеряков, Г.) (Moscow: Voennoe izdatel'stvo, 1953), 307.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Duffy, *Eagles over the Alps: Suvorov in Italy and Switzerland* (Chicago: The Emperor's Press, 1999), 158, 159.

<sup>10</sup> The total strength of Lecourbe's division was about 11,800 men, but one brigade, commanded by Gabriel Molitor, stayed far away in the Linth valley and did not affect Suvorov's advance to Schwyz, Miljutin, *Istorija vojny*, vol. 3, 473; von Reding-Biberegg (Рединг-Биберегг, фон), *Pohod Suvorova čerez Švejcariju (Pohod Suvorova čerez Švejcariju)* (St. Petersburg: T-vo hudožestvennoj pečati, 1902), 13, 14; Phipps, *The Armies of the First French Republic*, vol. 5, 129.

<sup>11</sup> Bogdanovič, *Pohody Suvorova*, 153; Miljutin, *Istorija vojny*, vol. 2, 202; Suvorov to Hotze, Linken and Korsakov (5 September 1799), *ibid.*, vol. 3, 478; Hotze to Suvorov (10 September 1799), *ibid.*, vol. 3, 480; von Reding-Biberegg, *Pohod Suvorova*, 12. Phipps assesses the strength of Auffenberg's brigade as 3,180 men, Phipps, *The Armies of the First French Republic*, vol. 5, 142.

<sup>12</sup> Nikolaj Grjazez, "Pohod Suvorova v 1799 g." – Aleksandr Vasil'evič Suvorov (Александр Васильевич Суворов), ed. S. Semanov (С. Семанов) (Moscow: Russkij mir, 2000), 194; "Dis-

Since this march was an impromptu decision, Suvorov had no time to study the region and acquire detailed maps. He and the Austrian commanders exchanged draft plans of their respective marches, but neither the Austrians nor Suvorov commented on the details of the drafts they received from their partner.<sup>13</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Franz von Weyrother commanded the Austrian staff officers attached to Suvorov; it was probably he who compiled the overall plan detailing the convergence of the allied forces in the Schwyz Canton.

The French Royal Army had, on occasion, fought in the Alps since early modern era: during the War of the League of Cambrai in 1508–1516; the Italian War of 1521–1526; the Nine Years' War in 1688–1697; and the War of the Austrian Succession of 1740–1748. The revolutionary Army of the Alps, raised by the French Convention in 1792, occupied the Duchy of Savoy in the same year, and most of Switzerland in 1798. As Clausewitz observes, “the French, who had [long] possessed these giants reaching to the skies and were quite familiar with these gorges, felt at home in this area.”<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the Russian soldiers had never fought in high mountains. Suvorov felt obliged to educate them about the operational theatre they were about to enter. His instructions, ambitiously called *Manual on Mountain Warfare*, were only four pages long and advanced several platitudes: Suvorov informed the soldiers that the progress of supply trains along mountain trails could be slow, emphasised the importance of envelopment as a major manoeuvre in the mountains, and called for occupation of the dominating heights. If the enemy had already occupied these heights, the Russians would have to attack them with cold steel.<sup>15</sup> Armed with the *Manual*, Suvorov's corps confidently headed towards the Alps.

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pozicija A. V. Suvorova,” 305, 306.

<sup>13</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 201, 202; Suvorov to Hotze, Linken and Korsakov (5 September 1799), *ibid.*, vol. 3, 477, 478.

<sup>14</sup> Carl von Clausewitz (Клаузевиц, Карл фон), *Švejcarskij pohod Suvorova* (Швейцарский поход Суворова) (Moscow: Voennoe izdatel'stvo, 1939), 108.

<sup>15</sup> A. Suvorov, “Pravila dlja voennyh dejstvij v gorah” (20 September 1799) – *Istorija rossijsko-avstrijskoj kampanii 1799 g.* (История российско-австрийской кампании 1799 г.), Egor Fuchs (Егор Фукс) (St. Petersburg: Voennaja tipografija General'nogo Štaba, 1825–26), vol. 3, 319–325. Russian historians grossly overestimate the value of these generalities: they claim that Suvorov “enriched military art ... with the first manual on mountain warfare”, “devel-

During the year of their deployment in the Swiss Alps, the French established food depots replenished by taxes imposed on the local population. Since the French forces were dispersed in small units in the upper reaches of Ticino and along the Reuss valley, these taxes were bearable. The Russians, as other armies on the march during these times, had to reckon on small amount of supplies carried with them but mainly on living off the land. They decided to take food for only seven days because they planned to cross the Alps in a week. Soldiers carried three days' worth of rations in their knapsacks, and mules and horses hauled the remaining four days' rations, as well as ammunition and mountain guns.<sup>16</sup> No Russian officer was concerned that the soldiers had no clothes other than the summer uniforms they wore on the hot Italian plains.

## The Plan Implemented: Breakthrough

Suvorov and his troops arrived in Taverne on 15 September and on 21 September his main forces began the Alpine trek.<sup>17</sup> The Austrian brigade commanded by Strauch joined Suvorov the next day. The Austrians suggested that Suvorov send one division around St. Gotthard via two passes, the highest of which, Oberalp Pass, was 2,046 metres.<sup>18</sup> This division was to strike into the rear of the St. Gotthard defenders, thus facilitating the progress of the main forces. Suvorov followed this advice and detached the 6,000-strong division commanded by Andrej Rosenberg for this mission; the rest of his men marched along the main road to St. Gotthard (Figure 2).

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oped the strategy and tactics of mountain warfare”, and thus “opened a new aspect of military theory,” L. Lešinšij, “Ital’janskij i Švejcarskij pohody Suvorova,” – *Suvorovskij sbornik* (Суворовский сборник), ed. A. Suhomlin (Сухомлин, А.) (Moscow: AN SSSR, 1951), 125, 129; M. Al’govzen, “Polkovodčeskoe iskusstvo Suvorova v Šveicarskom pohode,” *ibid.*, 151.

<sup>16</sup> “Plan obščej ataki na vystupivšago v malye Švejcarskie kantony neprijatelja” (September 1799), *Istorija rossijsko-avstrijskoj kampanii*, vol. 3, 482, 483.

<sup>17</sup> All the dates mentioned in this article have been converted from the Julian calendar, used by Russian contemporaries, to the Gregorian calendar.

<sup>18</sup> Colonel Strauch (no date), Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 3, 479.

Dmitrij Miljutin, the Russian Minister of War from 1861 to 1881, argues plausibly that Suvorov “had no idea what horrible obstacles he would have to overcome along the St. Gotthard route”.<sup>19</sup> The Alps were “terrifying mountain ridges”, wrote Suvorov. “Yawning abysses threatened to swallow us at every step through this kingdom of horror. Pitch dark nights, relentless thunderstorms, pouring rains, dense clouds, roaring waterfalls, and rocks falling from the mountains magnified our trepidation.”<sup>20</sup> This account, grossly inflating the mountain hazards on Suvorov’s way, shows that the sheer view of the mountains frightened Russian soldiers.<sup>21</sup>

When Suvorov and his men arrived at the foot of St. Gotthard on 24 September, they found only two French battalions with 1,861 men defending it<sup>22</sup> against his 19,500 Russian and Austrian soldiers. About 1,900 French were deployed at the northern foot of the pass, 12 kilometres away from its top, and at the neighbouring Oberalp Pass, which was another 10 kilometres away. A good but narrow trail traversed the steep slope towards St. Gotthard, with room enough only for a packed horse. The handful of French defenders, highly motivated revolutionary soldiers, knew the basics of mountain warfare and put up fierce resistance. The valley leading to St. Gotthard was so narrow that its entire length was exposed to musket fire from a dozen terraces towering over each other and offering a number of excellent defensive positions. The Russians did not even unpack their mountain artillery because the slopes leading to the pass were too steep.<sup>23</sup> They attempted to dislodge the French with bayonet charges, in the spirit of Suvorov’s *Manual*, but a concerted bayonet charge was impossible on the steep slope. Since Suvorov had had no communication with Rosenberg’s division, which was supposed to strike

<sup>19</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 201.

<sup>20</sup> Suvorov, “Donesenie Suvorova Imperatoru Pavlu I” (14 October 1799) – *Istorija*, Fuchs, vol. 3, 388, 389.

<sup>21</sup> Ja. Starkov (Я. Старков), *Rasskazy starogo voina o Suvorove* (Рассказы старого воина о Суворове) (Moscow, Izdatel’stvo Moskvitjanina, 1847), vol. 2, 185.

<sup>22</sup> Duffy, *Eagles*, 171. Reding-Biberegg states that only one French battalion initially defended St. Gotthard; it was reinforced much later by another battalion, Reding-Biberegg, *Poxod Suvo-rova*, 35, 36.

<sup>23</sup> Grjazev, “Poxod Suvorova,” 197.



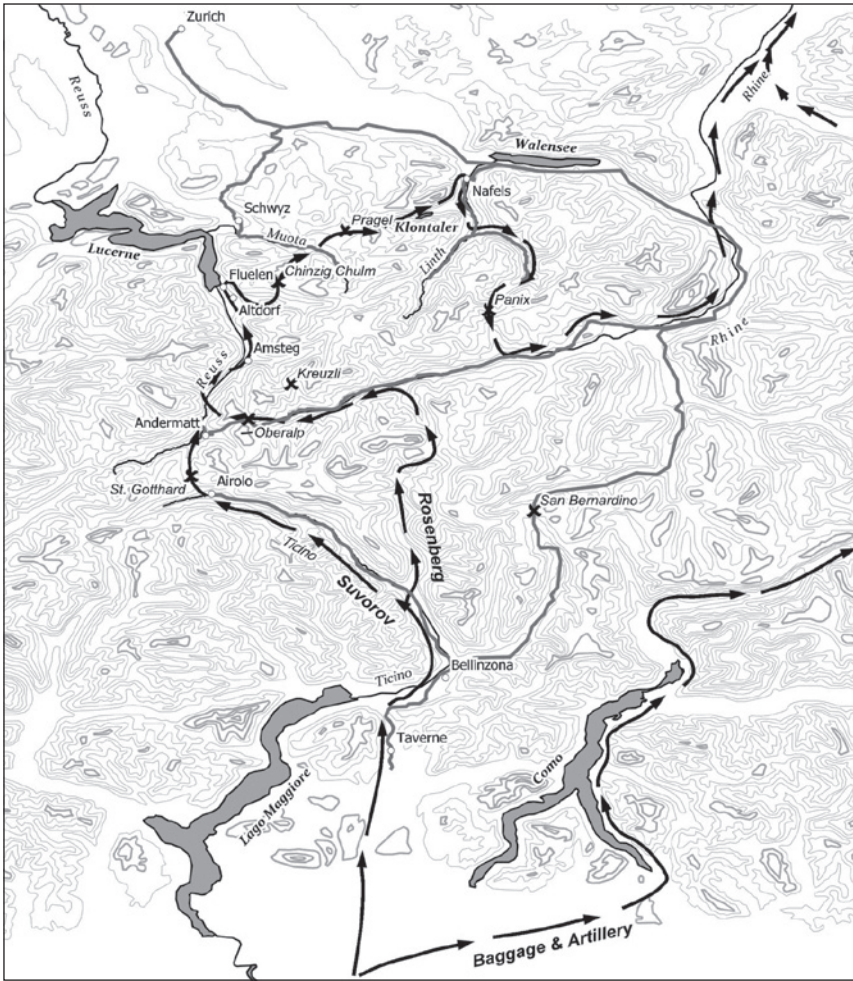


Figure 2. The routes of Suvorov and his baggage train, September – October 1799

St. Gotthard’s defenders from the rear, and so had no idea where it was, he sent two columns of six and four battalions, commanded respectively by generals Petr Bagration and Mihail Baranovskij, to envelop the left flank of the French positions at St. Gotthard (Figure 3). The shallow envelopment conducted by Bagration did force the French to leave the foot of the

pass and retreat to higher positions but did not solve the main problem: the French continued to block the way to the pass. While waiting for the second envelopment to bear fruit, Suvorov probed the French defences with several frontal attacks in violation of his own instructions about mountain warfare, which rejected such attacks in favour of envelopments. The Russians gradually pushed the French up the pass, but the advance of the Russian battalions, demoralised both by the staunch resistance and the unfamiliar environment, was slow;<sup>24</sup> the French, who had been reinforced by a battalion from the northern side of the pass, retreated from one terrace to another, inflicting heavy casualties on the attackers with accurate musket and artillery fire.

Meanwhile, the four battalions commanded by Baranovskij were climbing the main Alpine ridge along a broad but steep trail, seeking to envelop the left flank of the French position.<sup>25</sup> The trek was exhausting, and by the time Baranovskij's force finally reached the highest French position at the southern slope of the pass,<sup>26</sup> the main Russian forces had already begun attacking it, having lost 1,200 men, killed and wounded, in

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<sup>24</sup> Duffy, *Eagles*, 175. Most Russian historians attribute the deep enveloping march to the vanguard commanded by Bagration, Aleksej Šišov (Алексей Шишов), *Suvorov: Generalissimus velikoj imperii* (Суворов: генералиссимус великой империи) (Moscow, Olma-Press, 2005), 396; I. Rostunov (И. Ростунов), *Generalissimus Aleksandr Vasil'evič Suvorov* (Генералиссимус Александр Васильевич Суворов) (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1989), 456, 457; Nikolaj Orlov (Николай Орлов), *Pohod Suvorova v 1799 godu* (Поход Суворова в 1799 году) (St. Petersburg: Stoličnaja skororečatnaja, 1898), 201; A. Petruševskij (А. Петрушевский), *Generalissimus knjaz' Suvorov* (Генералиссимус князь Суворов) (St. Petersburg: RAN, 2005), 571. In fact, it was the column commanded by General Mihail Baranovskij from the division of Povalo-Švejkovskij, Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 212.

<sup>25</sup> Suvorov, "Dispozicija dopolnitel'naja k ovladeniju" (23 September 1799) – *Istorija*, Fuchs, vol. 3, 336. According to Clausewitz, this climb "across a terrain believed to be absolutely unpassable" was "the most stunning feat undertaken during Suvorov's campaign", Clausewitz, *Švejcarskij pohod*, 108. This claim, picked up by Russian authors (Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 217), is misleading: it is impossible to climb the steep slopes head-on from the village of Airolo at the foot of the pass, nor does it make any sense, because a dirt road, now called Old Canaria Trail, traverses the southern slopes of the main Alpine ridge, gently gaining height from Airolo and leading to the pass above the main valley where Suvorov's army was making its way. No other opportunity to reach St. Gotthard from the east exists. It takes five hours to reach the pass from Airolo. Baranovskij certainly had local guides who led his unit along the Old Canaria Trail.

<sup>26</sup> Suvorov, "Donesenie Suvorova," – *Istorija*, Fuchs, vol. 3, 393.

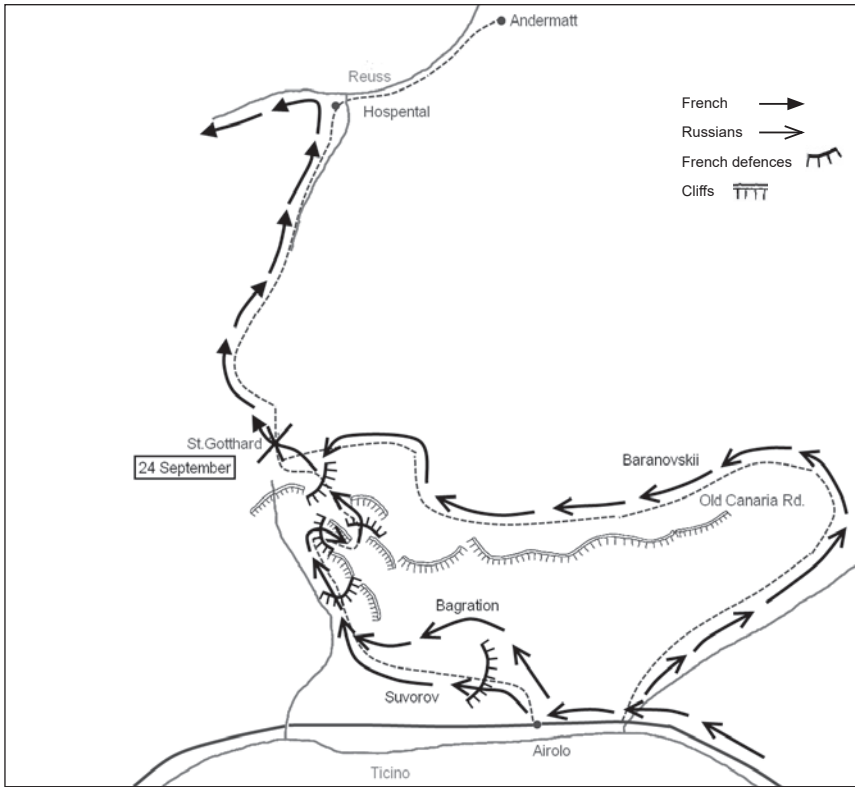


Figure 3. Assault on St. Gotthard

the frontal assault.<sup>27</sup> Baranovskij's soldiers had no chance to engage the enemy because when they suddenly emerged above the French position, the surprised defenders hastily abandoned it. The next day, Suvorov's corps descended into the Reuss valley.

At first, Suvorov believed that his army, rushing across the Alps with limited supplies, could not afford to take enemy prisoners. Captain Nikolaj Grjazev described Suvorov's initial policy: "As for enemy prisoners, we did not take them in this battle; the bayonets and [musket] butts relieved us of the burden of escorting them. Although such brutality contradicted

<sup>27</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 217, 218; Duffy, *Eagles*, 175.

humanist standards, the pursuit of our quest made us ignore this sacred duty and forced us to commit this horrible murder.”<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, Rosenberg’s division, which had been sent into deep envelopment of St. Gotthard, advanced under steady pouring rain along a difficult mountain trail with many fords.<sup>29</sup> On 24 September, the men climbed Oberalp Pass, where they ran into a French battalion blocking the way to the Reuss valley (Figure 4). The French, who had about 850 soldiers against 6,000 Russians, offered stubborn resistance at a position around a lake squeezed by narrows at the top of the pass.<sup>30</sup> Rosenberg sent two regiments along the high ground above the northern and southern banks of the lake to envelop both flanks of the French, while the rest of the division, supported effectively by mountain artillery, launched a frontal assault. The envelopment along the northern bank failed because steep cliffs did not allow the Russians to bypass the French position, while the marsh in front of it frustrated a swift approach. However, the envelopment along the southern bank succeeded after the regiment commanded by Mihail Miloradovič gained about 300 metres in elevation along a steep grassy slope and reached the top of the rocks towering over the lake. This helped them to dislodge the French from the pass; according to Russian estimates, probably inflated, the French lost 400 men killed, wounded, and taken prisoner.<sup>31</sup> The Russian casualties were 150 men killed and gravely wounded.<sup>32</sup>

The Russians drove the remnants of the French defending the right flank of their position to cliffs that seemed impassable, but the French escaped the trap, running down the cliffs “like goats, without slipping; only a few of them fell from the steep slopes.”<sup>33</sup> A Russian witness attributed this escape to the crampons worn by the French and left a credible description of the crampons. This was perhaps the first use of cram-

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<sup>28</sup> Grjazev, “Poxod Suvorova,” 198.

<sup>29</sup> Starkov, *Rasskazy*, vol. 2, 190.

<sup>30</sup> Duffy, *Eagles*, 171, 181. Another French battalion stayed in Andermatt, a town close to the western foot of the pass.

<sup>31</sup> Suvorov, “Donesenie Suvorova,” 401-403; Bogdanovič, *Poxody Suvorova*, 167.

<sup>32</sup> Starkov, *Rasskazy*, vol. 2, 195.

<sup>33</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 3, 495, 496; Starkov, *Rasskazy*, vol. 2, 206.

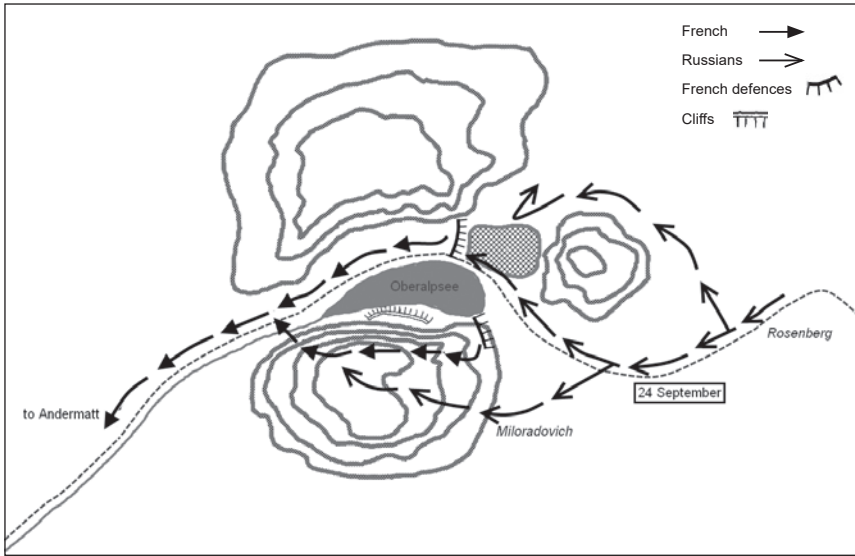


Figure 4. Assault on Oberalp

pons in combat ever recorded.<sup>34</sup> Rosenberg's division descended into the Reuss valley only two kilometres downstream from Suvorov's forces, thus blocking the retreat of the French defenders of St. Gotthard down Reuss and forcing them to march upstream and then across a pass to the Rhône valley. In order to secure the rear of his army from possible attacks, Suvorov had to leave Strauch's brigade at the northern foot of St. Gotthard.<sup>35</sup>

On the next day, 25 September, Rosenberg joined the main forces. His deep envelopment, slowed down by logistical constraints, did not help Suvorov's assault on St. Gotthard, nor did it trap the French defenders – its two primary missions – but it did prompt them to leave the Reuss

<sup>34</sup> According to Clausewitz, when Baranovskij's force climbed the Alpine ridge, it used crampons "manufactured by Austrians in large numbers especially for this purpose," Clausewitz, *Švejcarskij poxod*, 108. However, no Russian contemporary source mentions crampons used by Suvorov's soldiers, Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 3, 495, 496. The Russians could hardly have carried 2,000 pairs of heavy crampons with them when they had limited their food rations below the bare minimum, and the Austrians had no time to manufacture them "especially for this purpose."

<sup>35</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 3, 478.

valley and thus made them irrelevant for the rest of the campaign. The Russians sustained 2,000 total casualties in battles at St. Gotthard and Oberalp<sup>36</sup> – many more than the French.

The next obstacle Suvorov had to overcome was Urnerloch, a 70-metre-long tunnel cut in the rock forming the eastern side of the narrow and deep Reuss gorge (Figure 5). The tunnel ended at a small terrace above a bridge called Teufelsbrücke (Devil's Bridge), where the road crossed the gorge to the western bank of the river. The remnants of the French Oberalp garrison, reinforced by several battalions that had come upstream from Altdorf, gathered near Teufelsbrücke and Urnerloch, planning to block the only way down the Reuss. However, on 25 September, the day when Suvorov's army was approaching Urnerloch, an Austrian brigade commanded by Franz Auffenberg crossed Kreuzli Pass (2,347 m) from the upper Rhine into the Reuss valley and descended to Amsteg into the rear of the French defenders.<sup>37</sup> Although the French easily beat off the Austrian attack, they decided to abandon the position at Teufelsbrücke and retreat to Altdorf to avoid a possible entrapment. They left only a small rear-guard at the bridge. The events developed so quickly that the rear-guard could only damage but not destroy the massive bridge across the deep gorge behind their retreating forces. The Russians pushed through Urnerloch and Teufelsbrücke, but witnesses' descriptions and historians' interpretations of these incidents are strikingly different.

Suvorov's account – subsequently dramatized even further by Russian authors – presented the crossing of Teufelsbrücke as similar to Napoleon's attack on the Bridge of Arcole, which had happened only three years earlier. According to these authors, the Russian vanguard rushing through the Urnerloch tunnel was suddenly hit by grapeshot from a French gun positioned at the tunnel's exit and by musket fire from two French battalions defending Urnerloch and Teufelsbrücke: "Behind every rock, all along the trail, down at the river and up in the mountains – everywhere were muskets delivering accurate fire."<sup>38</sup> On seeing that the attack through

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<sup>36</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 222.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 227; Rostunov, *Generalissimus*, 458.

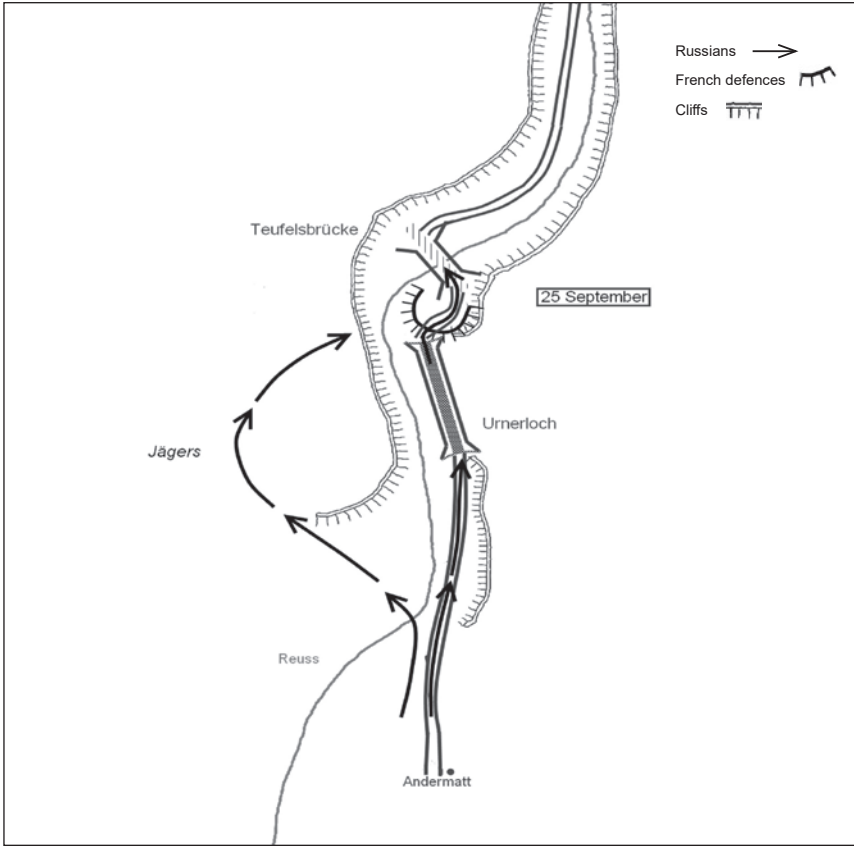


Figure 5. Assault on Teufelsbrücke

the tunnel was impossible, Russian commanders sent 300 musketeers over the rocks of the eastern bank above Urnerloch and a Jäger battalion across the Reuss to its western bank. The battalion forded the 1.5 metre-deep river, struggling against a strong current, and climbed up steep rocks, thus coming to the top of a cliff above and across the river from the small terrace at the exit of Urnerloch.<sup>39</sup> They could not descend the vertical cliff, but they drove away the French defenders from the terrace at the exit of Urnerloch below them with rifle fire, while the musketeers

<sup>39</sup> Bogdanovič, *Poxody Suvorova*, 170; Petruševskij, *Generalissimus*, 576.

above Urnerloch shot at the bridge defenders below. When the Russian vanguard reached the bridge and found that it was damaged, the soldiers used officers' sashes, in the absence of ropes, to tie together several logs the French had taken off the bridge. They threw the logs across the gap in the bridge's damaged section, after which the French retreated, losing 280 men in the engagement.<sup>40</sup>

Other eyewitnesses and authors dismiss this story.<sup>41</sup> Clausewitz believed that Urnerloch and Teufelsbrücke “were defended by very weak forces or had almost no defenders” and assesses their maximum strength as one company.<sup>42</sup> The French apparently damaged not the bridge itself but only the access to it. Grjazev provides a different description of the Teufelsbrücke crossing; he calls his narrative unexciting but says that it reflects “the events without any inventions and omissions”. He acknowledges that the Russians were depressed while moving through Urnerloch, as if they “were entering hell”, but denies that they met opposition either in Urnerloch or at Teufelsbrücke.<sup>43</sup> In any case, if the French

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<sup>40</sup> Suvorov, “Donesenie Suvorova”, 389, 402–406; Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 224, 227, 228; Bogdanovič, *Poxody Suvorova*, 170; Šišov, *Suvorov*, 398, 399; Rostunov, *Generalissimus*, 460; Petruševskij, *Generalissimus*, 577.

<sup>41</sup> Duffy, *Eagles*, 189. Even Miljutin questions Suvorov's entire report about the Swiss campaign and admits that it describes events “very vaguely and superficially,” Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 3, 492, 497, 498. Miljutin suspects that it was perhaps Egor Fuchs, Suvorov's secretary, who produced the romanticised version of the Teufelsbrücke crossing. Yet Miljutin still offers this version as a fact. No eyewitnesses mention artillery staying at Urnerloch, and as is clear from Suvorov's report, the episode with the gun firing grapeshot at the Russians advancing along a narrow trail towards the bridge happened not at Teufelsbrücke but at another bridge near Altdorf. Suvorov, “Donesenie Suvorova,” 407. The terrace at the exit of Urnerloch is so small that it could accommodate only perhaps two platoons rather than two battalions, and the exit of Urnerloch is invisible from any other place. The sketch drawn by Russian contemporaries shows only French pickets on the western side of the river rather than two battalions, Duffy, *Eagles*, 189. No doubt, most of the French forces left Teufelsbrücke before the emergence of Suvorov's vanguard to avoid a possible entrapment by Auffenberg, and a small rearguard had to retreat as soon as the Jägers outmanoeuvred it. The story about musketeers climbing above Urnerloch along the rocks of the eastern bank is an obvious misinformation because it would be impossible to climb those vertical rocks; the musketeers mentioned in primary sources could only climb the 20-metre-high rocky bump after they had exited Urnerloch.

<sup>42</sup> Clausewitz, *Švejcarskij poход*, 113.

<sup>43</sup> Grjazev refers sarcastically to the romanticised version of the story: “As to our crossing of the miraculous Teufelsbrücke, the inventive genius of mankind displayed a vivid imagination



offered even a token resistance in the tunnel, the Jägers' march across the Reuss and around Urnerloch must have played a crucial role in breaking it.<sup>44</sup>

Having crossed Teufelsbrücke, Suvorov's army marched down the Reuss, sweeping away small French rear guards that attempted to delay its advance (Figure 6). On 26 September, Suvorov, joined by Auffenberg's brigade, reached Altdorf, near the southern shore of Lake Lucerne and on the eastern bank of the Reuss. Lecourbe moved most units of his two brigades, which by this time totalled 5,000 to 6,000 men,<sup>45</sup> to the western bank, destroyed all the bridges across the river, and spread his forces all along the Reuss to prevent the Russians from restoring the bridges.<sup>46</sup> Only 700 to 900 men were left to oppose Suvorov at Altdorf,<sup>47</sup> and the Russians easily drove them out of town.

## The Plan Amended: Friction of War

With only 17 kilometres now separating Suvorov from the town of Schwyz at the edge of the Alps, the rendezvous point with the Austrians, he found that the road he had planned to take to reach Schwyz ended at

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and presented a colourful picture to our sovereign: it was claimed ... that the officers ... tied together partially burned logs with their sashes. I myself was a participant in this crossing, and our regiment was always at the vanguard, but I did not see it. Men sent in advance fixed the partially burned logs and boards and added new ones, and it was possible to cross with due caution," Grjazev, "Poxod Suvorova," 201. Grjazev was, however, in the vanguard of the main forces, while other eyewitnesses state that it was Rosenberg's division that took the bridge, Starkov, *Rasskazy*, vol. 2, 198. The fact that Suvorov was asleep during the "assault" on the bridge indirectly supports Grjazev's version and suggests that no serious engagement took place there, Duffy, *Eagles*, 193.

<sup>44</sup> Teufelsbrücke was a poor position: as soon as Russians exited Urnerloch, the defence of the bridge was untenable because its garrison would have found itself at a narrow road carved in the vertical rock exposed to fire from high ground on the opposite side. It was at Urnerloch rather than Teufelsbrücke where the French could have attempted to pin the Russians down, but as soon as Russian Jägers forded the river and climbed the rocks towering over the exit of the Urnerloch, its defenders had to retreat.

<sup>45</sup> Clausewitz, *Švejcarskij poxod*, 116.

<sup>46</sup> Duffy, *Eagles*, 198.

<sup>47</sup> von Reding-Biberegg, *Poxod Suvorova*, 41.

Flüelen, a village just north of Altdorf on the eastern shore of the lake. High vertical cliffs emerged straight from the water on both sides of the lake, precluding any opportunity to climb them and go north along either side.<sup>48</sup>

Even before Suvorov had entered Switzerland, Ferdinand de Roverea, a Swiss colonel, had warned the Russians that the only way from Altdorf to Schwyz would be via Chinzig Chulm Pass (2,073 m) along a difficult trail into the Muota valley, which leads to Schwyz.<sup>49</sup> When Suvorov was approaching Altdorf, he may still have hoped to find a path along Lake Lucerne, but when it turned out that none existed, he was ready for this worst-case scenario and ordered his army to march across Chinzig Chulm. Suvorov left Rosenberg's division at Altdorf as rear guard to protect the passage of the supply train from attacks of Lecourbe's forces and then to march behind the train.

The soldiers spent 12 hours covering the 16 kilometres across the pass. The vanguard began the ascent on 27 September, but it took the entire army, including the slow supply train, four days to reach the Muota.<sup>50</sup> The Russian reports of the march across the Chinzig Chulm maintain that "every misstep threatened death";<sup>51</sup> "many unfortunates died on this torturous way: some from cold, exhaustion, or starvation; many others

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<sup>48</sup> von Reding-Biberegg, *Poxod Suvorova*, 39. Numerous Russian allegations that the Austrians misled Suvorov by telling him about "a narrow path" leading from Altdorf to Schwyz along the eastern bank of Lake Lucerne are false, Lopatin, *Suvorov*, 732; Rostunov, *Generalissimus*, 461, 462; Leščinskij, "Ital'janskij i Švejcarskij poxody," 124; L. Beskrovnyj, "Strategija i taktika Suvorova," – Suhomlin, *Suvorovskij sbornik*, 39; Šišov, *Suvorov*, 393. Miljutin and other Russian historians who imply Austrian treason give no evidence to back their speculations. In fact, the allegation that the Austrians mentioned "a narrow path" comes only from Hotze's letter to Suvorov on the eve of the campaign, in which he simply wrote that Auffenberg rather than Suvorov would "follow a narrow path to Schwyz Canton to join me there," Hotze to Suvorov (10 September 1799), Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 3, 480. He said neither that this path went along the lake's bank nor that it led to the town of Schwyz; he meant only that there was a path to the Schwyz Canton. Such a path did indeed exist across the Chinzig Chulm pass. Both Suvorov and Weyrother may have misinterpreted this incidental remark as a statement that the path led from Altdorf to Schwyz along the lake's eastern bank. In the end, Suvorov took the trail suggested by Hotze for Auffenberg's brigade.

<sup>49</sup> Duffy, *Eagles*, 160, 161.

<sup>50</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 233, 235.

<sup>51</sup> Petruševskij, *Generalissimus*, 583.

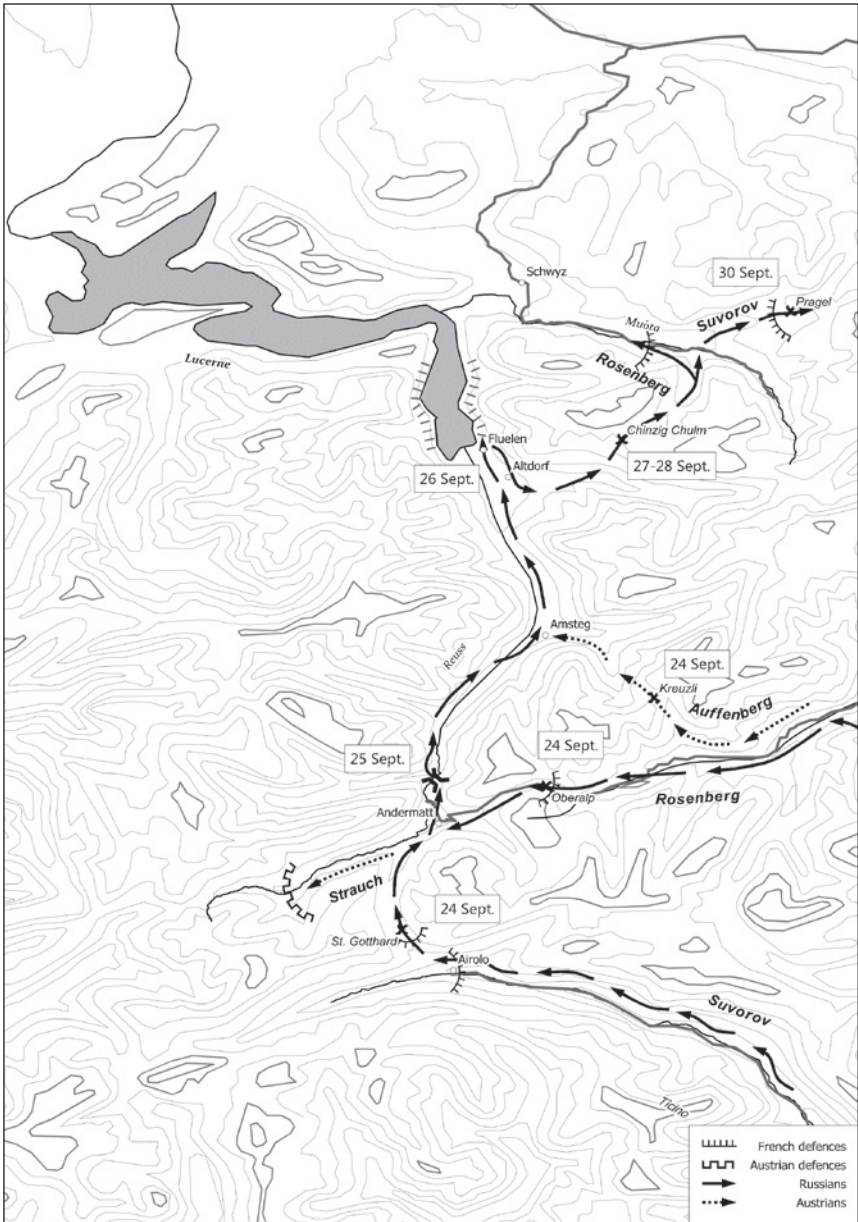


Figure 6. Suvorov's march from St. Gotthard to Prager

fell from the cliffs and met a horrible death in the abysses.”<sup>52</sup> In fact, the trail to the pass is muddy and slippery but absolutely safe; stepping into a cow pat is the greatest danger that a trekker may encounter during the crossing of Chinzig Chulm.<sup>53</sup> It was not so much the actual difficulty of the trek as its perception by the soldiers – strangers to the mountains, weakened by malnourishment, and exhausted by a long march – that was responsible for the overdramatised tales. Many had to spend a night at the pass above treeline, exposed to icy wind and rain and shivering in their soaked summer uniforms around tiny smouldering fires set from the boards of a demolished barn,<sup>54</sup> and many must have caught cold as a result. After descending from the pass, freezing soldiers warmed up by burning any wood they could find in the first village in the Mouta valley – fences, barn doors, and the hardwood floors of homes.<sup>55</sup>

Suvorov knew that mountain regions were sparsely populated and that it would be impossible to requisition anything but hay.<sup>56</sup> The soldiers had already consumed all the rations in their knapsacks by the time they reached Altdorf, and most of their supply train lagged several days behind. Since Suvorov was already one day behind schedule when he arrived in Altdorf<sup>57</sup> and would be delayed even further for his rendezvous with the Austrians at Schwyz, he left for the Muota valley without waiting for the supply train. Rusks carried by those few mules that could

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<sup>52</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 230. According to the Russian authors, the steep snow-covered path went over high cliffs, and the trail “at this time of the year was accessible only to courageous hunters accustomed to climb huge cliffs and remote icefields,” *ibid*; Al’tgovzen, “Polkovodčeskoe iskusstvo,” 146. However, in reality, no icefield existed at Chinzig Chulm; eyewitnesses mention extreme fatigue, thunderstorms, and cold winds but no snow on the way to the Muota.

<sup>53</sup> Having retraced Suvorov’s route in the late nineteenth century, Rudolf von Reding-Biberegg, lieutenant-colonel of the Swiss General Staff, found that Russian authors “grossly inflate the difficulty of the march. They write about yawning abysses into which horses and riders were falling, horrible gorges, ... terrifying rocks and paths at dizzying heights. Anyone who has walked across the pass knows that in reality, ... troops could easily and safely cross it, even with horses unaccustomed to the mountains. The best proof of this is the fact that [the local] residents ... have been driving horses and cattle across the pass for ages,” von Reding-Biberegg, *Poxod Suvorova*, 54, 55. I can confirm that Reding-Biberegg’s statement is correct.

<sup>54</sup> Starkov, *Rasskazy*, vol. 2, 205.

<sup>55</sup> von Reding-Biberegg, *Poxod Suvorova*, 56, 137.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>57</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 232.

keep up with the army got wet under frequent rains and rotted. Many pack animals died from exhaustion on the way to the Muota. Many others lost their horseshoes on the granite rocks and moved slowly, overcoming pain. Because of the slow progress of the supply train and its rapid attrition, soldiers' rations were cut after St. Gotthard. They began to suffer from malnourishment during the march to the Muota. Grjazev describes how they chewed roots they had dug. "Meat was so scarce," he writes, "that we were forced to eat such [animal] parts that, at another time, we would have regarded as disgusting; even the cattle hide was used: we cut it up in small pieces, burned the hair over fire after putting it [the hide] on ramrods, grilled it [mainly] in our imagination, and ate it half-raw."<sup>58</sup> Soldiers were so hungry that when they dug potatoes from the fields of local farmers, they could not wait until they were cooked and ate them raw. They slaughtered farmers' cattle and ate raw meat; they also ate candles in churches and picked all the fruit they could find, whether ripe or not.<sup>59</sup> It was still possible to buy cheese from the Swiss but soldiers perceived blue cheese as rotten and did not eat it.<sup>60</sup>

During these unanticipated lengthy, rainy marches along poor trails in high mountains, soldiers began grumbling about Suvorov, "the old man" who "has lost his marbles and has brought us God knows where."<sup>61</sup> When Suvorov heard this muttering, he tried to boost morale with jokes, eccentric manners, and charismatic rhetoric, calling his soldiers "invincible giants" (*čudo-bogatyri*).<sup>62</sup> When flamboyant rhetoric was insufficient to maintain discipline, Russian officers restored it with drastic measures. Maksim Rehbinder, a regiment commander, ordered soldiers to "bayonet the cowards and throw them like scabby sheep out of the flock: cowards can ruin the battle, they are as contagious as plague."<sup>63</sup> Suvorov's methods of morale maintenance, however, still leaned to carrot rather than stick, and they proved to be adequate for this brief campaign.

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<sup>58</sup> Grjazev, "Poxod Suvorova," 204, 205.

<sup>59</sup> Lopatin, *Suvorov*, 520.

<sup>60</sup> Grjazev, "Poxod Suvorova," 205; Petruševskij, *Generalissimus*, 582.

<sup>61</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 309.

<sup>62</sup> Starkov, *Rasskazy*, vol. 2, 256.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

Having descended to the Muota on 28 September, Suvorov learned that on 25 and 26 September, Masséna had crushed Korsakov's corps, killing, wounding, and taking prisoner 8,000 of its 27,000 soldiers, after which the Russians had fled in disorder to the German frontier.<sup>64</sup> This defeat made Suvorov's march westwards to Schwyz, where Masséna was now assembling his main forces, pointless and dangerous.<sup>65</sup> Suvorov began to contemplate advancing in the opposite, eastern direction via the low Prigel Pass (1,550 m) into the Linth valley, towards the Austrian allies, but he discovered that the French general Jean-de-Dieu Soult had defeated Hotze, who was attempting to link with Suvorov. Soult's division, available now for actions against Suvorov, stayed close to the mouth of the Linth River near the northern exit from the Alps, and a part of the French brigade commanded by Gabriel Molitor blocked Prigel and the eastern exit from the Muota valley; Lecourbe's brigades pursuing Suvorov's rearguard sealed the Chinzig Chulm trail, blocking the way to retreat. Suvorov realised that his entire march across the Alps had been futile and that his army was in a mousetrap, surrounded in the Muota valley. At the military council called on 29 September, Suvorov delivered a fiery speech that worked his officers up into frenzy. As Bagration recalled, "I was ... in such a euphoric mood that even if myriads of enemies attacked us, I would have been ready to fight them. ... Everyone felt the same."<sup>66</sup> Suvorov decided to break through Prigel and then to the northern exit from the Alps at the mouth of the Linth, in the hope of joining the Austrian formations still present in the region.<sup>67</sup> After the arrival of the supply train and some requisitions, Suvorov's army had food for

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<sup>64</sup> Duffy, *Eagles*, 220.

<sup>65</sup> Suvorov – and after him, most Russian historians – stated that the five-day delay in Taverne, where the Russians waited for the Austrian-provided mule train, was fatal because Suvorov could not join Korsakov at Zurich before Masséna attacked and routed him, Lopatin, *Suvorov*, 730; Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 280; Petruševskij, *Generalissimus*, 586. In fact, Suvorov would have been too late anyway because he found that the exit from the Muota valley to Schwyz was blocked by Mortier, and his rearguard came to Muotathal village, which was 74 kilometres from Zurich, only in the late afternoon of 30 September, Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 277, 290.

<sup>66</sup> Lopatin, *Suvorov*, 733.

<sup>67</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 3, 513.

five days. The council decided to cut soldiers' rations by half to extend them to 10 days.<sup>68</sup>

The next day, 30 September, Suvorov began advancing towards Prangel, leaving Rosenberg's division as rear guard to cover the march from a French division commanded by Edouard Mortier that was expected to attack from Schwyz.<sup>69</sup> A part of Gabriel Molitor's brigade, numbering 3,500 men,<sup>70</sup> offered stubborn resistance at Prangel to Suvorov's vanguard of 4,200 Russians and Austrians,<sup>71</sup> which continued into the next day, 1 October. At the end of the first day of fighting, the French had to retreat beyond Klöntaler Lake and blocked the only trail, carved into the cliffs that make up the lake's northern bank (Figure 7). The French brigade pinned the Russians down with musket and artillery fire at this position, which seemed impregnable. Russian mountain guns were too short range and small calibre to engage effectively the French field artillery deployed at the plateau behind the narrows.<sup>72</sup> The Russians spent the night near the lake in the open, shivering under the rain and unable to sleep.<sup>73</sup> But they sent two regiments above the rocks that form the northern bank of the lake and another regiment along its southern bank to envelop the French position from both flanks.<sup>74</sup> The southern envelopment failed because a high cliff bordering the lake descended straight into the water, but the exhausting night march to the high point on the northern bank, during which the two regiments had to climb several hundred vertical metres through thick wet woods, brought the soldiers above and behind the French position. The next day, when Russian reinforcements arrived at Klöntaler Lake from Prangel and the French also received some reinforcements, the Russians launched an attack, combining a frontal assault along the trail blocked by the French with a strike from the rocks above the French position. The offensive began before dawn, and soldiers attacking

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<sup>68</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 3, 513.

<sup>69</sup> Lopatin, *Suvorov*, 359.

<sup>70</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 284. Phipps assesses the strength of Molitor's formation at this time as 2,599 men, Phipps, *The Armies of the First French Republic*, vol. 5, 153.

<sup>71</sup> Duffy, *Eagles*, 226.

<sup>72</sup> Grjazev, "Poxod Suvorova," 211.

<sup>73</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 289.

<sup>74</sup> Duffy, *Eagles*, 229.

from the rocks above could not see their way; some of them fell from the cliffs to their death.<sup>75</sup> They still suffered lighter casualties than those who participated in the frontal assault. Grjazev was among the latter, and he recorded that “the whole narrow trail, especially the stretch that exited to the plateau, was covered with the bodies of our men to such an extent that it became impassable. With broken hearts, we had to throw them into the lake to free our way and then stepped on piles of the bodies of our comrades to break through to the plateau.”<sup>76</sup> But the flank attack forced the French to abandon their position and retreat down to the Linth valley.

Meanwhile, on 30 September, a French division commanded first by Mortier and then by Masséna came up the Muota and engaged Rosenberg’s rear guard. During this and the next day, the rear guard, with about 8,000 men engaged the French forces, which totalled 9,000 to 10,000 men.<sup>77</sup> After several frontal attacks on the French positions failed, on 1 October a Russian envelopment march across a forest along the foot of the mountains that formed the northern side of the Muota valley<sup>78</sup> surprised the French and facilitated a frontal attack that ended in the rout of the French. Many fleeing French soldiers plunged to their deaths during the stampede at the narrow bridge over the Muota River. The French lost about 2,000 men killed, wounded, or taken prisoner, whereas the Russian losses were 500 to 600 men wounded and an unknown number killed.<sup>79</sup> By gaining this victory, Rosenberg shook Masséna off Suvorov’s tail and followed the rest of the army across Pragel.

Having realised that his corps, burdened with many wounded and sick soldiers, would be unable to move quickly across the mountains, Suvorov ordered Rosenberg to leave 600 of the wounded and sick, along with 1,000 French wounded prisoners, in the Muota valley with a letter to Masséna in which Suvorov stated that the Russian wounded were

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<sup>75</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 282, 295.

<sup>76</sup> Grjazev, “Poxod Suvorova,” 212.

<sup>77</sup> von Reding-Biberegg, *Poxod Suvorova*, 81, 84; Philip Longworth, *The Art of Victory* (London: Constable, 1965), 284. According to Phipps, this French division had 7,800 men. Phipps, *The Armies of the First French Republic*, vol. 5, 149.

<sup>78</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 293.

<sup>79</sup> Suvorov to Emperor Franz II (11 October 1799) – *Istorija*, Fuchs, vol. 3, 382; von Reding-Biberegg, *Poxod Suvorova*, 95.



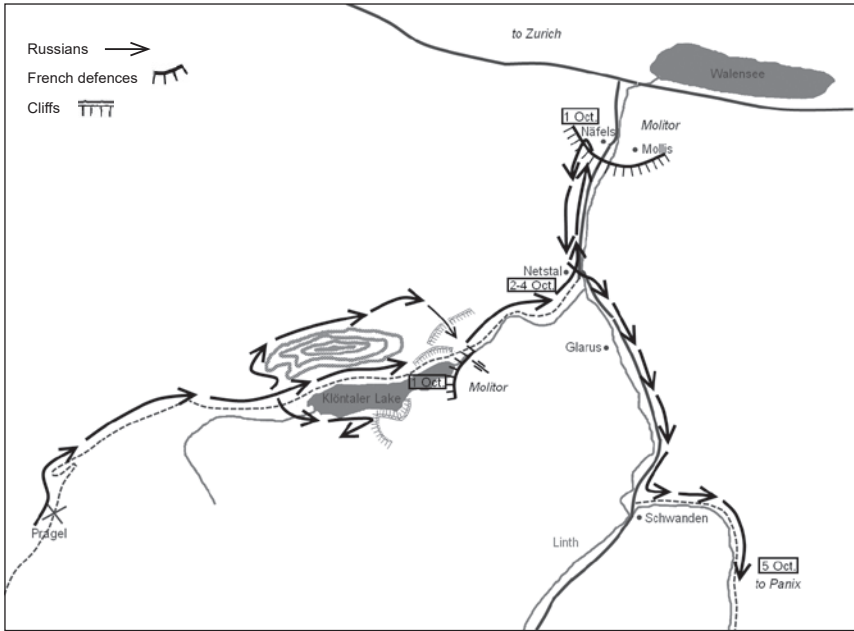


Figure 7. Breakthrough along the Klöntaler Lake and the debacle at Näfels

entrusted to “the humane protection of the French.”<sup>80</sup> It was a bold request after the slaughter of all the French who had attempted to surrender at St. Gotthard. Yet the French treated the prisoners humanely and provided medical care.<sup>81</sup>

After arriving in the Linth valley, Suvorov pursued the French down the Linth River to Näfels, a town located at the exit from the Alps, where the French made a stand, blocking the valley on both riverbanks and thus making envelopments impossible. The Russian vanguard and the remnants of Molitor’s brigade were of equal strength,<sup>82</sup> but the Russian mountain guns again could not match the French field artillery. In the battle on 1 October, Näfels changed hands several times in a bitter fight

<sup>80</sup> Duffy, *Eagles*, 242; Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 298; vol. 3, 520.

<sup>81</sup> Starkov, *Rasskazy*, vol. 2, 273.

<sup>82</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 3, 518; Duffy, *Eagles*, 241. Phipps states that at that moment 4,700 French soldiers faced about 7,000 Russians, Phipps, *The Armies of the First French Republic*, vol. 5, 156.

but in the end, the Russians exhausted their ammunition and could not break through. Given the presence of Soult's division nearby, the inferiority of the Russian artillery, the lack of ammunition, and the pressure of the Grand Prince Constantine, who travelled with Suvorov as a tourist, the military council that was called the next day decided to abandon the attempts to break through and to retreat via the high Panix Pass (2,407 m) into the Rhine valley, which was held by the Austrians.<sup>83</sup> Although all earlier engagements in the Swiss campaign ended with Russian victories, the failure to break out of the Alps at Näfels was a strategic defeat that nullified all those victories because it was the last nail in the coffin of the strategic plan that presumed the cooperation of the allied forces in Switzerland.<sup>84</sup> Before marching to Panix, the Russians again left 400 of their sick and wounded soldiers at the mercy of the French, with the written plea to spare them.<sup>85</sup>

## The Plan Scrapped: Retreat

On 5 October, after Rosenberg's rear guard re-joined Suvorov, the march to the Rhine began. The French vigorously pursued the Russians inflicting such heavy casualties on their rear guard commanded by Bagration that its remnants could barely re-join the main forces without being annihilated; they even had to abandon a chest with 30,000 francs.<sup>86</sup> This fighting retreat, according to Weyrother, shattered the morale of the Russians, who were already shaken by fatigue, the failure to break through at Näfels, and the privations suffered in the unfamiliar mountain environment.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Suvorov to Archduke Carl (7 October 1799) – *Istorija*, Fuchs, vol. 3, 354; Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 3, 521.

<sup>84</sup> Suvorov does not say a word about the battle at Näfels in his report to Tsar Paul, instead presenting his campaign as a series of brilliant victories, although he even contemplated retreat back to Italy, which would have been an admission of total failure, Suvorov, "Donesenie Suvo-rova," 388–422.

<sup>85</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 302; Bogdanovič, *Poxody Suvorova*, 183.

<sup>86</sup> Grjazev, "Poxod Suvorova," 218; von Reding-Biberegg, *Poxod Suvorova*, 125.

<sup>87</sup> Duffy, *Eagles*, 248.

By this time, the boots of most Russian soldiers were so worn down from the rocky trails that their officers and later observers referred to Suvorov's army as "mostly barefoot", which, while perhaps an exaggeration, still testifies to the poor shape of their footwear.<sup>88</sup> General Rehbinder wore boots without soles; he cut parts of his overcoat and wrapped them around his feet, as did many soldiers,<sup>89</sup> while others took boots from 1,400 French prisoners<sup>90</sup> whom they convoyed across the Prigel and Panix passes, leaving them barefoot. The Russians imposed a contribution of 700 pairs of boots on a Swiss town, and when the residents failed to deliver the boots, the soldiers pulled them from their feet.<sup>91</sup> In addition, the soldiers were weakened by malnourishment: for several days, they had their rations cut to one-quarter of the regular ration.<sup>92</sup>

On 6 October, this barefoot, starving army began climbing Panix. A trail leading to the pass was covered with fresh snow that was half a metre deep.<sup>93</sup> Most of Suvorov's army had avoided snow so far; only the rear guard had crossed small patches of fresh snow at Chinzig Chulm and Prigel.<sup>94</sup> At Panix, however, the deep snow had a grave impact on the outcome of the trek. The path was hard to find because it climbed side cliffs instead of following the bottom of the valley, and the fresh snow obscured the steepness of the slopes. Thick clouds and blizzards obstructed the view.<sup>95</sup>

Russian authors call this trek "Golgotha".<sup>96</sup> Suvorov summarised his impressions of the Panix crossing: "No description would be able to render the horrors of nature. The sheer memory of it torments our souls."<sup>97</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Suvorov to Rastopčin (13 October 1799) – *Istorija*, Fuchs, vol. 3, 387; Grjazev, "Poxod Suvorova," 205; Clausewitz, *Švejcarskij poxod*, 118, 132; Lopatin, *Suvorov*, 519; Petruševskij, *Generalissimus*, 585.

<sup>89</sup> Starkov, *Rasskazy*, vol. 2, 251; Grjazev, "Poxod Suvorova," 205.

<sup>90</sup> Longworth, *The Art of Victory*, 288.

<sup>91</sup> von Reding-Biberegg, *Poxod Suvorova*, 68, 108, 139.

<sup>92</sup> Starkov, *Rasskazy*, vol. 2, 254.

<sup>93</sup> Grjazev, "Poxod Suvorova," 219.

<sup>94</sup> von Reding-Biberegg, *Poxod Suvorova*, 72; Duffy, *Eagles*, 242, 252.

<sup>95</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 305; Bogdanovič, *Poxody Suvorova*, 186.

<sup>96</sup> A. Kersnovskij (A. Керсновский), *Istorija ruskoj armii* (История русской армии) (Moscow: Golos, 1993), v.1, 191.

<sup>97</sup> Suvorov, "Donesenie Suvorova," 390.

The army began its single-file ascent along the northern slope of the pass at 4:00 a.m. and spent the whole day climbing to its top through the thinning air. Grjazev described how the soldiers marched “along a very narrow icy path that leaned towards the yawning abyss, where a careless or false step could lead to a [deadly] plunge, which is what happened to some”. They had to gather all their courage “to defeat the elements, the most terrifying and merciless enemy”.

[The soldiers] were in quite a deplorable state, and this horrific sight caused utmost sorrow. Our entire army and regiments mixed together; each man walked where he chose, ... the weakest fell and paid the ultimate price to the elements; those who wanted to rest sat down and fell into eternal sleep; those who walked had to struggle against a bitterly cold wind with freezing rain that covered them with ice. Almost frozen, we could barely move and fought for our lives. There was no shelter or even a piece of wood to make a fire and warm up our frozen limbs. ... We threw away or lost everything we carried, even the weapons – the primary protection of a soldier. Everyone looked out only for himself; nobody commanded, and the discipline collapsed.<sup>98</sup>

By evening, only the vanguard had crossed the pass; the rest had to spend the night at the pass above treeline, battered by a blizzard.<sup>99</sup> As Bargation recalled, “The mud and snow were our bed, and the sky showering us with snow and rain was our blanket.”<sup>100</sup> When soldiers began freezing, their commanders allowed them to make fires from Cossack spears and the carriages of mountain guns; the guns themselves had to be thrown into an abyss. Thus, Suvorov lost all the artillery with which he had started the march.<sup>101</sup>

The descent from the pass was even more difficult than the ascent, with high vertical cliffs blocking the entire valley. Although the path climbed around the cliffs, the snow had obliterated it. The steep slope, covered with a snow crust, was slippery. Only half of the mules had sur-

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<sup>98</sup> Grjazev, “Poxod Suvorova,” 219–221.

<sup>99</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 305.

<sup>100</sup> Starkov, *Rasskaz*, vol. 2, 221.

<sup>101</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 305.

vived the march to Panix,<sup>102</sup> and even those who had come through had lost their horseshoes and could not negotiate the icy slopes. The soldiers had to push them down the cliff one by one, hoping that at least some would survive; most did not.<sup>103</sup> When Grjazev finally descended to the forest, “soaking wet and covered with mud, totally exhausted and tormented by sorrow, I fell on the wet moss, but a terrible cold shook my whole body and forced me to jump up.”<sup>104</sup> Sergeant Jakov Starkov believed that the crossing of Panix was more horrific than any battle of the Swiss campaign: “Those damn mountains gave us hell! They tormented us nearly to death.”<sup>105</sup> Even a century after the Swiss campaign, the residents of the Panix village located at the southern foot of the pass recounted how the descending Russian mob took all the food and cattle they could find, tore clothes and boots from the villagers, and burned down all the fences and wooden roofs to warm themselves up.<sup>106</sup> During the Panix trek, Suvorov lost over 200 men through freezing to death or slipping into the abyss. Many more were frostbitten and sick from hypothermia, and about 100 soldiers experienced temporary snow blindness.<sup>107</sup> Having crossed Panix into the Rhine valley, Suvorov effectively removed his army from Switzerland, leaving the country to the French. Tsar Paul ordered the return of Suvorov’s army to Russia.<sup>108</sup> This was the end of the Swiss campaign, which lasted 17 days, from 21 September to 7 October. During this time, the Russian Army covered 270 kilometres across four mountain passes.

Although Suvorov won a number of victories during the Swiss campaign, this happened in part because the Russians outnumbered or matched the opposing French forces in all the engagements, except the battle of Rosenberg’s rear guard at the Muota. In the assaults on St. Gotthard, Oberalp, and Teufelsbrücke and in the small clash at Altdorf, the

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<sup>102</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 298.

<sup>103</sup> Grjazev, “Poxod Suvorova,” 219.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>105</sup> Starkov, *Rasskazy*, vol. 2, 255.

<sup>106</sup> Lopatin, *Suvorov*, 520.

<sup>107</sup> Clausewitz, *Švejcarskij poxod*, 133; Duffy, *Eagles*, 258.

<sup>108</sup> Paul I to Suvorov (7 October 1799) – *Istorija*, Fuchs, vol. 3, 360.

Russians grossly outnumbered the enemy, and in the battle at Klöntaler Lake, they still had more men than the French, although the French had a better artillery. Suvorov's army suffered grave attrition, both from combat and from exposure during treks across the Alps. Suvorov maintained that by the end of the campaign, he had retained only about 11,500 uninjured soldiers, or half of those with whom he began the campaign.<sup>109</sup> In addition to the heavy personnel casualties, Suvorov also lost all his mountain artillery, most horses and mules, and many hand weapons. The French assessed their casualties during the 15 days of the Swiss campaign – including the actions against Korsakov, Hotze, and Auffenberg – as 6,000 men killed, wounded, or taken prisoner.<sup>110</sup> This number might exclude the sick, but even so, it is clear that in the Alps, the French lost fewer soldiers in actions against Suvorov than he did.

Most non-Russian scholars, and a small minority of Russian historians assess Suvorov's campaign in Switzerland as a failure<sup>111</sup> but maintain that he escaped annihilation because of his and his generals' talented leadership and the impressive combat skills of his personnel. Suvorov's bombastic reports of glorious victories that he sent to Tsar Paul<sup>112</sup> did not obscure the fact that the Swiss campaign failed to attain its goal – the expulsion of the French from Switzerland. On the contrary, the French crushed Korsakov and Hotze and soon occupied the entire country. Suvorov escaped destruction but suffered so many casualties that, in the words of Clausewitz, they “equalled those in a lost battle”.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Suvorov wrote on 13 and 14 October that he had only 10,000 able-bodied men, “barefoot and naked”, which did not include Cossacks, Suvorov to Rastopčin (13 October 1799) – *Istorija*, Fuchs, vol. 3, 387; Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 323. A lieutenant-colonel of the Russian General Staff calculated that less than 1,500 Cossacks remained able-bodied, Bogdanovič, *Poxody Suvorova*, 187.

<sup>110</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 3, 526.

<sup>111</sup> For instance, Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars*, 253; Phipps, *The Armies of the First French Republic*, vol. 5, 157; Clausewitz, *Švejcarskij poxod*, 133, 134; Petruševskij, *Generalissimus*, 604; Miljutin, *Istorija vojny*, vol. 2, 307.

<sup>112</sup> They included the misinformation that Suvorov had taken General Lecourbe prisoner, Suvorov to Emperor Franz II (11 October 1799) – *Istorija*, Fuchs, vol. 3, 382. This misinformation was later repeated by many Russian historians as a fact, Leščinskij, “Ital’janskij i Švejcarskij poxody,” 129; Al’tgovzen, “Polkovodčeskoe iskusstvo,” 129; Šišov, *Suvorov*, 411.

<sup>113</sup> Clausewitz, *Švejcarskij poxod*, 133.

Scholars of the Swiss campaign put forward two reasons for its failure: flawed strategy and the mistaken choice of route across the Alps. Clausewitz believed that the campaign was doomed from the outset because it presumed coherent actions of several large formations spread over great distances with messengers as the only means of communication; these formations belonged to two allied armies with different cultures, political goals, and strategic priorities. He called the whole idea of the campaign “a giant mistake. Its failure was the result of the strategy on which it was based, and even if no mistakes and no unfortunate incidents had occurred during its implementation, the result could not have been much better. ... The fact that this campaign did not lead to an even worse outcome and a complete disaster was due to the courage of the Russians and the grave mistakes committed by the French.”<sup>114</sup>

As for the route across the Alps, it is easy to see, in retrospect, that Suvorov’s major mistake was the choice of the St. Gotthard trail instead of the roads via St. Bernardino Pass or Como Lake and Tyrol, where no French forces were deployed. His slow supply train and artillery, which followed what was believed to be a much longer Como Lake route, reached the Rhine well ahead of Suvorov’s army, with no problems encountered on the way.<sup>115</sup> Genrikh Leer, a major nineteenth-century Russian military thinker, called the choice of route via St. Gotthard “a grave strategic error.”<sup>116</sup> While Suvorov later admitted that the choice of route was erroneous, he habitually blamed the Austrians for allegedly suggesting it.<sup>117</sup> Before the start of the campaign, however, he stated that he opted for that route because it allowed him to “go straight to the enemy and engage his weakest positions instead of losing time in a timid effort to join forces via

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<sup>114</sup> Clausewitz, *Švejcarskij poход*, 149, 150.

<sup>115</sup> von Reding-Biberegg, *Poход Suvorova*, 112.

<sup>116</sup> Orlov, *Poход Suvorova*, 82.

<sup>117</sup> Petruševskij, *Generalissimus*, 566. Most Russian historians supported this thesis, and some even interpreted the alleged Austrian advice as treason, Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 3, 477; Lopatin, *Suvorov*, 730. These accusations are groundless: first, von Reding states that Suvorov chose the St. Gotthard route against the initial advice of the Austrians, who suggested the way via San Bernardino; second, as Petruševskij observes, “One cannot attribute perfidy or ill will [to the Austrians] because Suvorov’s failure ... directly hampered their own strategy,” von Reding-Biberegg, *Poход Suvorova*, 20; Petruševskij, *Generalissimus*, 566.

long detours.”<sup>118</sup> Being inexperienced in mountain warfare, Suvorov, in Petruševskij’s words, “erroneously took long for short and complicated for simple”<sup>119</sup> and failed to consider many problems that must have been anticipated. He gravely underestimated the mountain combat skills of the French, as well as the difficulty of marching in the fall season and the potential logistical challenges.<sup>120</sup> The plan to march via St. Gotthard was Suvorov’s brainchild, and, as Leer observes, no alleged mistakes of the Austrians “acquit Suvorov: whether the general acts according to his own plan or that suggested by someone else, glory in the case of success and blame in the case of failure are laid at his feet alone, because it was he who was responsible for its implementation.”<sup>121</sup>

Nonetheless, even those authors who call the Swiss campaign an unqualified failure pay tribute to the actions of the Russian generals and soldiers who did everything possible to mitigate the dire consequences of a flawed strategy, showing tactical excellence and great endurance.<sup>122</sup> According to Clausewitz, “If the actual outcome of Suvorov’s campaign was more a defeat than victory, in terms of morale it was more a victory than a defeat.” The Russian soldiers “must have perceived this trek as a raging torrent that swept away all the dams built by the enemy, ... and the destruction of any such dam as a victory.”<sup>123</sup> Clausewitz’s conclusions are supported by a choir of Russian authors claiming that “this failed campaign brought more glory than the most brilliant victory.”<sup>124</sup> As one of them put it, “The Leuthen campaign of Frederick II was elegant; Napoleon’s Italian campaign was brilliant; Suvorov’s Swiss campaign earned eternal glory. No nation and no army have ever gained such a stunning victory of morale over the elements.”<sup>125</sup> Miljutin argues that “the Swiss campaign was actually the zenith of Suvorov’s military glory”,<sup>126</sup> and

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<sup>118</sup> Suvorov to Hotze (13 September 1799) – *Istorija*, Fuchs, vol. 3, 290.

<sup>119</sup> Petruševskij, *Generalissimus*, 565.

<sup>120</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 308; von Reding-Biberegg, *Poxod Suvorova*, 22.

<sup>121</sup> Orlov, *Poxod Suvorova*, 83.

<sup>122</sup> Petruševskij, *Generalissimus*, 604.

<sup>123</sup> Clausewitz, *Švejcarskij poxod*, 133, 134.

<sup>124</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 307.

<sup>125</sup> Kersnovskij, *Istorija ruskoj armii*, 1, 192.

<sup>126</sup> Miljutin, *Istorija*, vol. 2, 309.



many authors cite Masséna's apocryphal phrase: "I would have exchanged all my 42 campaigns for Suvorov's campaign in Switzerland."<sup>127</sup> The daring trek across the Alps has stuck in Russian historical memory, and the emphasis on glory has eclipsed its ultimate strategic failure.

## Conclusion: Lessons of the Swiss campaign

In terms of strategy, the Swiss campaign showed that the margin of error is inevitably narrower in the mountains than on the plains. The Alpine trek was an impromptu action, and this was the major reason for its failure. Strategy should be simple in the mountains because communication and logistical problems frustrate the coherent actions of large formations scattered at great distances, but it is hard to make it simple because the landscape inevitably splits the armies, and the weather complicates things by adding surprises in addition to those prepared by the enemy. It is easier to surprise and be surprised in the mountains than on the plains because the landscape impedes intelligence acquisition and conceals manoeuvres: Suvorov's army achieved a complete surprise at the approaches to St. Gotthard, Oberalp, and Chinzig Chulm, and the French failed to stop them at any of these excellent defensive positions. But poor weather can disable more men than enemy actions, as Suvorov learned when he calculated the total casualties suffered by his army. Therefore, a serious effort must be invested into the detailed study of a potential mountain operational theatre, including its mapping and the analysis of its climate, before the beginning of the campaign in order to thin "the fog of uncertainty", mitigate the weather factor, and avoid shocking discoveries of the sort that awaited Suvorov at Lake Lucerne when he found no road to Schwyz. Commanders must be flexible enough to adjust not just their tactics but even their strategic plans to realities they had failed to foresee, as Suvorov did in the Muota valley when he completely changed

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<sup>127</sup> Beskrovnyj, "Strategija," 39; Al'tgovzen, "Polkovodčeskoe iskusstvo," 151; Šatagin, "Velikij ruskij polkovodec," 25; Orlov, *Poxod Suvorova*, 82. No historian references this alleged phrase of Masséna.

the direction of his march; therefore, even strategic decisions should be made by senior field commanders rather than by their General Staff superiors, who are far away and have no adequate picture of either the environment in which their soldiers operate or their morale. Since operations in the mountains presume more physical discomfort than those on the plains, and poor weather has graver consequences, a special effort must be made to maintain soldiers' morale. Furthermore, as Suvorov found out, the mountain environment alone, even in the absence of enemies, distressed professional Russian soldiers; this suggests that units operating in the mountains should ideally be raised from residents of mountain regions accustomed to such an environment.

As for tactical lessons, the Swiss campaign showed that numerical superiority brings fewer benefits in the mountains than on the plains because the mountain landscape often prohibits the concentration of the available units at a certain point and may help a handful of soldiers to pin down a far superior force. Consequently, high mobility and tactical manoeuvres, such as the envelopments undertaken by the Russians during the assault on St. Gotthard and Oberalp and at Teufelsbrücke, at the Mouta and Klöntaler Lake, are a must during an assault on well-entrenched enemy positions, notwithstanding the frequent failures of such manoeuvres due to impassable terrain. Since both sides understand that the mountain landscape can greatly enhance their strength, it is vital to promptly occupy good positions before the enemy does. Furthermore, as Clausewitz observed after studying the Swiss campaign, "Mountain warfare leads to atomisation of military formations; their various elements often fight on their own, which means they have to take initiative. This is true for both ... generals and ... every private."<sup>128</sup> Infantry must learn the special tactics of mountain warfare, and the individual training of a soldier fighting in the mountains must be more diverse than that of his counterpart operating on the plains. Those who plan to fight in the mountains have to train their manpower in a mountain environment to smooth the "friction of war". Infantry should be backed by mountain artillery, which, although inevitably inferior to regular field

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<sup>128</sup> Clausewitz, *Švejcarskij poxod*, 243.

guns, is still able to provide adequate support in a terrain prohibitive for regular cannons.

Logistics is often the focal point of mountain warfare, and the General Staff has to be able to foresee what soldiers can and cannot do in a certain season, given the topography on which they operate. Logistical problems are enormous: marches are slow and exhausting; a shorter but steeper trail often takes more time than a longer but gently sloped one. The scarcity of population in the mountains makes it difficult to live off the land or find accommodation; therefore, soldiers should carry with them tents and food. Since every additional kilo in the knapsack increases fatigue, and the attrition of supply trains is great, a large extra number of pack animals, packs, and horseshoes must be accumulated before the beginning of the campaign. Suvorov's treks across Chinzig Chulm and Panix showed that circumstances frequently force soldiers to spend nights above treeline, where they are exposed to cold, bitter winds and possibly blizzards; consequently, they need warm uniforms to survive in such conditions. They also need sturdier boots than usual. Even if soldiers are dressed appropriately, the mountain environment guarantees that casualties from non-combat causes – disease, frostbite, and injury – will be considerably higher per capita in the mountains than on the plains, and while the number of casualties inflicted by enemy fire will probably be smaller, the transportation of the injured and sick will be an acute problem; their abandonment at the mercy of the enemy can ruin the morale of able-bodied soldiers. Consequently, means of transportation of the injured have to be developed, and a sufficient numbers of pack animals and soldiers must be allotted to this task. The conveying and feeding of POWs increases the severe logistical strain, and commanders have few options as to how to tackle this matter. Failure to anticipate all these problems and find viable solutions may cause far graver repercussions in the mountains than on the plains.

Finally, those who study historical experience in order to draw lessons for future actions should read the accounts of past campaigns with a critical eye, keeping in mind that battles in the austere but beautiful mountain environment provoke more romantic tales than do engagements on the plains. These tales should be identified as such and filtered so that they do not obscure the actual problems.

These lessons would have been relevant to every subsequent campaign that Russia fought in the mountains and could have helped the generals planning actions in such battle environment, had they learned these lessons. However, since mountains were on the verges of Russia and away from the military theatres perceived as most probable, its generals consistently neglected the experiences of their predecessors in such terrain and retained a haphazard approach to mountain warfare. That is why Russia's actions in the mountains were usually marked by high casualty rates from non-combat causes and embarrassing reversals, despite substantial superiority in firepower and numbers over enemy skilled in mountain warfare. This happened during the counterinsurgency in the Caucasus in 1817–1864, the war against the Ottoman Empire in 1877–1878 in the Balkans, the campaign in the Carpathians during World War I, the defence of the Caucasus in 1942, the breakthrough across the Carpathians in 1944, and the fight against Islamic guerrillas in Afghanistan in 1979–1789 and Chechen separatists in 1994–1996.

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