

## [When Swords Heal – A Screenplay](#)

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**Copyright holder:** United States Copyright Office

**Genre:** Historical Fiction

**Setting:** Post-reformation 16th century Germany

**Target audience:** Religious conservatives and freedom-loving patriots

**Predicted rating:** PG-13 due to war violence

**Estimated budget:** 2.5 to 9.5 million dollars

### **Premise / Commercial and theological significance:**

How should Christians respond to tyranny? That we are bound to suffer is evident in Scripture, but do we suffer through unconditional submission to tyranny, through peacefully resisting tyranny, through armed resistance to tyranny, or are there other biblical options? These are very important questions for God's people.

The biblical doctrine of the lesser magistrates is the belief lesser civil authorities have the duty to protect the innocent within their lawful jurisdiction, even if they must interpose between tyrannical higher magistrates and the people. This doctrine is defended in the historical context of the Roman Emperor's attempt to violently stamp out the Reformation in the sixteenth century, and the successful resistance of the Christian city of Magdeburg, Germany. The tension between the biblical obligation to submit to the authorities and the duty of lesser magistrates to resist tyranny is displayed in a dramatic conflict between a Magdeburg pastor and his eldest son when they take opposing views on submission to the Emperor.

The present-day crises of the vacuum of fatherly authority in the home, and of increasing socialism and immorality in government demand practical, biblical answers. This riveting true story sets forth the biblical answers in a winsome fashion.

As the burgeoning freedom movement grows in the West, many conservative leaders have attempted to fortify this movement on the foundation of humanism – the same foundation upon which the present threats to our freedom are erected. With the federal government expanding and freedoms dwindling, lesser magistrates are beginning to resist and nullify federal usurpations in many arenas: federal healthcare policy, federal gun control, legalized abortion, and federal immigration policy. This resistance is promising in the eyes of many conservatives, but unless we return to the God of our forefathers, then these remedies will ultimately fail to preserve the blessing of freedom for posterity. The testimony of Magdeburg reminds us that the worship of Christianized idols is not an improvement over godlessness in the eyes of our holy Lord.

Religious conservatives must grasp the doctrine of the lesser magistrates if we are to protect freedom from a massive, intrusive federal government, *and* if we are to avoid false remedies and assert state and local sovereignty in a way that pleases the Lord. “When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” the psalmist asks. It’s not rhetorical: we *can* rebuild. But we must build on the immovable foundations of God’s Word and law, without which man cannot long be free.

The true story of Magdeburg’s victory against the mighty Roman Empire is a largely undiscovered, come-from-behind, underdog-victory of biblical proportions. It provides a dramatic, action-packed context to teach the critically important doctrines of lesser magistrates and interposition, and of fatherly authority over the home.

### **The Treatment of “When Swords Heal” by Dr. Patrick Johnston**

*While most have never heard of the German city of Magdeburg on the banks of the Elbe, they would never have heard of Luther’s 95 Theses or the Reformation if the city had not prevailed against impossible odds through a 13 month siege at the hands of the ruthless Roman Empire. Father is pitted against son in the battle of the ages, when tyranny rises against freedom and freedom resists.*

With the death of Martin Luther, the Reformation lies upon the edge of a Roman sword. The Roman Emperor attempts to stamp out the Reformation through force. Magdeburg is one of many Protestant cities that unite in defense of liberty and the Gospel, forming the Schmalkaldic League. Magdeburg’s pastors – our fiery protagonist Stefan Richter being one of the most vocal of them – insist that the City Council protect “God’s Word, pure and clear” as the standard for morality and justice.

Magdeburg’s leaders are torn between their obligation to submit to Higher Authorities, and the lesser magistrates’ duty to resist Higher Authorities when they defy the Highest Authority – God Almighty – and tyrannically oppress the people. Pastor Stefan is always bold to remind the city leaders that pleasing God is the measure of success, and that he that loses his life for Christ’s sake, and the Gospel’s, will save it. As Protestants and patriots, they are citizens of Magdeburg *before* they are citizens of the Roman Empire. He is uncompromisingly dedicated to God’s Word and has a multi-generational vision to preserve liberty for posterity.

Pastor Stefan is responsible for defending the eastern wall of the city in the event of an Imperial siege, which everyday looks to be more inevitable. He trains his sons to fight beside him. His family works hard to store the 366 days of food, which is a mandate of the City Council.

The conflict becomes personal for Stefan when his oldest son, 19-year-old Martin, succumbs to offense. The City Council, perceiving the authority of the local Archdiocese to be a threat to the preservation of the Gospel, has expelled the leaders of the Archdiocese and confiscated their land. Martin’s friend Hans has been forced to leave the city, belonging to a family in leadership in the Archdiocese. Martin is disgusted with the city leaders’ treatment of what he perceives to

be lawful Imperial authority, and with increasingly caustic resistance to the Emperor among the citizenry. Martin abandons Magdeburg to pursue a life, as he informs his broken-hearted father, “on the right side of these walls.”

Beyond the safety of the city walls, Martin soon discovers firsthand the devastating effects of the Imperial penalties against the Protestant villages around Magdeburg. Hordes of vicious, godless mercenaries pillage and murder without threat of civil penalty. Martin courageously rescues a woman from the wrath of two straggling, intoxicated mercenaries. The young woman persuades him to pursue her surviving sister, who has been kidnapped and carried away. Martin joins the Imperial army for an opportunity to free the girl.

The Imperial penalties do not subjugate the Protestant fortresses of Germany as the Emperor intends. On the contrary, resistance grows even more brazen. The Schmalkaldic League militia grows to ten thousand strong – the pride of Protestant Germany. When the massive Imperial army of professional mercenaries invades Germany, the Schmalkaldic forces strike pre-emptively, attempting to quickly secure a victory that would keep the gains of the Reformation alive. Unfortunately, the Schmalkaldic forces are destroyed, thanks, in part, to the wise and cunning counsel of private Martin Richter. His father had trained him well in the art of war for the defense of Magdeburg. However, Martin soon becomes a dangerous weapon in the hands of those who conspire against his hometown.

One critical ally of the Emperor is a Protestant prince, Maurice of Saxony. The Emperor appoints Maurice to the position of Elector and Duke of Saxony, situated in northern Germany. It's a dream come true for the ambitious prince, until he is ordered to enforce a compromise of dogma and liturgy on the people, to mix a little leaven with the Reformation doctrines. The Emperor calls this compromise the “Interim” because it serves as a temporary mandate until the Council of Trent can be convened to decide the fate of the divisive Reformation doctrines. The Emperor orders Maurice to subdue all the resilient Protestant cities in his jurisdiction. Maurice loathes the duty, especially when fellow German princes label him “Judas” – the betrayer who sells the Gospel for the Emperor's gold. But as the Duke of Saxony, he considers obedience to the Emperor his duty to God.

Germany's Protestant cities soon fall prey to the seduction of the Emperor's proposed compromise. The “Interim” and the Imperial army turns city after Protestant city into submissive allies. Submission to the Emperor for peace is seen as “the lesser of two evils” in light of the devastating penalties for purity of doctrine and liturgy.

Martin serves faithfully in the Imperial army under Maurice's command and rises in prominence. However, he is a thorn in the side of Maurice's council, daring to reprove them for their drunkenness, carnality, and the treatment of captive women.

Faithful Protestant leaders living in Magdeburg unite to operate one of the most effective pamphlet printing and distribution campaigns in the history of the Middle Ages, flooding Germany with tracts defending their position from Scripture and criticizing the Emperor's usurpations. This cripples the Empire's propaganda machine, which attempts in vain to convince German commoners that Magdeburg is comprised of brigands and rebels. Germans are reluctant

to join the Imperial army to fight against “Jerusalem, and the Lord God’s chancery.” Maurice’s army is dependent upon expensive mercenaries to fight its battles and manage its sieges.

Careful to not trust in the arm of the flesh to win what is primarily a spiritual battle, the leadership of Magdeburg crafts a set of mandates for all citizens. Adultery and drunkenness is banned. Twice a year, all recite an oath of allegiance to the Gospel and their city. Daily at noon, all cease from business or play, fall to their knees, and plead God’s deliverance from the false Gospel of the Emperor’s Interim and the cruelty of his army.

Maurice sends Martin with a troop of soldiers to spy and conquer a Protestant town on the outskirts of Magdeburg, occupied by Magdeburg militia. Maurice’s counselors mistrust Martin, and suspect that his scrupulous conscience would forbid him to wage war against fellow Magdeburgers. But Martin’s general is intent on promoting him, and Maurice has developed a fondness for the bold, young Lutheran whose former residence in Magdeburg may provide him with a strategic edge in a potential siege. Maurice hopes the mission in this suburb of Magdeburg will serve to prove Martin’s loyalty to the Emperor and willingness to make war on his hometown.

Martin succeeds in conquering the Magdeburg militia. Following Maurice’s orders, the ten survivors are to be hung for treason. Suddenly, a subordinate brings another beaten and bloodied survivor to the young Captain. An eleventh nose is swung over the branch of a tree when Martin, to his horror, realizes that it is his brother. How can he spare his beloved brother and simultaneously demonstrate his devotion to Maurice and the Emperor?

Imperial forces soon surround Magdeburg. Stefan orders the burning of everything outside of the gate, and the villagers retreat inside the walls. The gate is bolted. The siege of Magdeburg begins. Maurice hopes to defeat them quickly and come to a satisfactory peace. The Emperor, Maurice knows, would show no mercy. Maurice offers terms of surrender to the city’s leaders, but they refuse to submit to the Emperor’s false gospel.

Maurice cannot afford a long siege, and can restrain his battle-hungry generals no longer. He orders a charge. The battle is fierce, but the Magdeburgers hold the city against repeated vicious assaults.

Stefan is horrified to discover that his son Martin is a leader in the Imperial forces arrayed against them. Stefan is forced to deal with a painful reality: he may have to heave weapons of war at his son for the Gospel.

Day after day, cannon shakes the very walls of the city, and night after night, Stefan and the guardians of the wall loosen the stones of the cathedral to reinforce the weaker areas of the city wall. Even the cathedral headstones are uprooted and mortared to the wall. The elderly craft arrows from the wood shattered loose from homes by cannon shrapnel. Mothers mourn over the shallow graves of their husbands and sons. The young men carry water to put out the fires. Young girls scavenge for insects for their family’s evening meal. And the pamphlet runners sneak past enemy lines to bring the message of faith and liberty to the German people. The whole city is unified in its trust in God for deliverance. The same God who spared Daniel from

the lions' jaws, who saved Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace, and who in one night slew 185,000 Assyrians besieging Jerusalem, will he now abandon His remnant?

Maurice of Saxony stumbles upon an incident from history while reading through a sleepless night. He learns of the refusal of the Roman governor of Syria and Palestine – Petronius – to install an idol of the Roman Emperor in the temple of Jerusalem in A.D. 39. Furious, the Emperor sent an order to Petronius to commit suicide. However, the ship notifying Petronius of the Emperor's tragic death arrived *before* the ship notifying Petronius of the Emperor's order to commit suicide. Through this testimony from history, Maurice comes to realize that his faith has been similarly tested, but rather than trust God and do right, he bowed to the Emperor and installed the idol. With a Roman sword, he drew German blood to publish the false Gospel of the Interim.

Martin similarly begins to question his allegiances. His conscience revives to probe his cold, prayerless heart. Face to face in Maurice's tent, as the fog of busyness dissipates and the echoes of consciences begin resonate more forcefully, the Duke of Saxony and the young Captain from Magdeburg begin to realize they may not be on the right side of Magdeburg's walls.

After 13 months, the city begins to bury those who succumb to starvation. The most aggressive assault ever finally breeches the gate, but the Magdeburg defenders are prepared, having built a ritualgia inside the gate to repel all those who breach it. The gateway becomes clogged with dead and dying Imperial soldiers. The exhausted surviving Imperial soldiers are forced to drag their injured in a long, embarrassing retreat out of archer range.

One of Stefan's younger boys is severely injured defending the wall near his father. At first, his mother Helda blames her husband for her son's suffering. However, when the noon bell tolls, this beloved son forces his burned and tormented body out of bed to fall to his knees in prayer with the rest of the city. Upon witnessing the young man's unbending faith and heartfelt prayer, Helda finally comes to repentance for her unbelief.

Maurice, anxious to end the conflict before the Emperor is forced to personally invade northern Germany and subjugate the city with brutal violence, meets secretly with the Magdeburg City Council, with Martin by his side. For the first time in two years, Martin and his father are face to face. Martin's heart softens in view of his father's tears and affection. They warmly embrace. Martin weeps to discover his grandmother succumbed to starvation. Martin urges his father to stay off the wall. "We will bring down the wall soon, father."

Stefan looks his son in the eye. "I do not fear death for the Gospel, and I fear the death of none of my children – but you."

As Stefan and Martin talk quietly, Maurice delivers his offer to the City Council. The campaign against Magdeburg has allowed him to raise a mighty German force under the Emperor's nose. Maurice promises to pay the Imperial fines levied against the city – without interest. Following a ceremonial surrender, Maurice expresses a willingness to be Magdeburg's defender against the Emperor. He promises to secure their freedom of religion.

With these favorable conditions, the City Council surrenders. Before the decision is finalized, however, a massive barrage of cannon fire begins to decimate what buildings remain intact within the city. Some on the City Council grow suspicious. Why would the Imperial cannons fire into the city knowing their military commander is making a favorable appeal for peace inside? With the City Council and Martin leading the way, Maurice is escorted past thousands of starving Magdeburgers to the wall. Suspecting a breach, Magdeburg's warriors almost slay Maurice. Martin defends him as they ascend the stairs to the top of the wall. From his elevated position, Maurice orders the Imperial forces to stand down. A coup among Maurice's leadership almost succeeds in resuming the attack, but God's sovereignty directs an arrow right to the heart of the devil's schemes in a dramatic, surprising ending to one of the most awe-inspiring stories in the history of Christendom.

