Swiss and the American Civil War

In 1862 the Swiss Consul General at Washington estimated that 6,000 Swiss-born soldiers were fighting in the Union Army. Since as many as 2,300,000 men served in the northern armies during the Civil War, Swiss participation was statistically small. A larger—probably much larger—percentage of Swiss marched with George Washington than with McClellan or Grant. Yet, paradoxically, we know much more about the Swiss who fought in the Civil War than we do about their brethren who served in the Continental Army.

One thing we know is that only a handful of Swiss served in the Confederate Army. A certain Getulius Kellersberger, a colonel in a Confederate engineering corp in Texas, wrote memories about his experiences, but the records are otherwise silent about Swiss in the Southern armies. There is one exception: Major Henry Wirz of Zurich. Wirz emigrated to the United States in 1849 at the age of twenty-six. Eventually settling in Louisiana, Wirz became an enthusiastic supporter of secession, joined the Confederate Army, and was severely wounded at the battle of Seven Pines in 1862. In 1864 he was appointed commander of the prisoner-of-war camp at Andersonville, Georgia, called by one recent Swiss author “the Auschwitz of America” and stigmatized by another as a precursor of the Nazi extermination camps, (“Vernichtungslager des Dritten Reiches”). Casualties among the prisoners during Wirz’s tenure were so high that after the war the victorious Union government tried him for what would today be called war crimes and hanged him, the only post-war execution of a Confederate soldier or official. Whether Wirz was, in fact, a mass murderer, a “devil in human form,” or a scapegoat for the sins of others, remains to this day a matter of dispute among scholars.

We know more about Swiss in the Union Army. There were several units in which Swiss soldiers were conspicuous. The Fifteenth Missouri Regiment, recruited in St. Louis and nearby Highland, Illinois, contained so many sons of Helvetia that it was
called the Swiss Rifles. In battle it carried a distinctive flag which combined the white Swiss cross on a red field with thirty-four stars on a field of blue.⁵ Company A of the famous First United States Sharpshooters ("Berdan's Sharpshooters") was mostly Swiss. Its exploits were described in a book, Drei Jahre in der Potomac-Arme, published in Richterswil, Switzerland, in 1865 by Captain Rudolph Aschmann, who lost a leg outside Petersburg, Virginia, in July, 1864.⁶ Swiss were also sprinkled through the 82nd, 144th and 149th Illinois, the 7th, 9th and 39th New York, the 107th Ohio regiments, and several other units.

Individual Swiss soldiers had memorable Civil War careers. Hermann Lieb, for example, from Ermatingen, canton of Thurgau, rose rapidly from a private in the 8th Illinois Regiment to a major. General Grant put a Mississippi river boat at his disposal so that he could raise a regiment of blacks. In little time Lieb recruited eighteen hundred blacks and organized them into the 5th United States Colored Heavy Artillery which distinguished itself in combat. By war's end, Lieb was promoted to general and commanded the artillery west of the Mississippi. He later became a mainstay in the Democratic Party in Chicago.⁷ Even more dramatic was the career of Emil Frey.⁸ Scion of an old Basel family, Frey was in Illinois studying agronomy—an imaginative newspaper writer later had him "punching cows"—when the Civil War broke out. Frey enlisted in the 24th Illinois Regiment, commanded by Friedrich Hecker, and later served as a captain in the 82nd Illinois. Captured at Gettysburg, Frey was imprisoned for eighteen months in Libby Prison in Richmond. His confinement was rigorous because he was held as a hostage for a Confederate officer condemned to death by a Union court-martial. For some months Frey and two other men were confined in the "black hole" where they were forced "to catch and eat rats which swarmed in our cell." Frey later recalled that "the negro who cleaned out the cell in the morning was sometimes good enough to roast for us that awful game."⁹ Returning to Switzerland after the war, Frey had a successful political career. In 1882 he was appointed first Swiss minister to the United States and in 1894 he became President of the Swiss Confederation.

The Civil War, understandably, made a lasting impression on Frey and his fellow Swiss soldiers. In 1899 a reunion of Swiss war veterans was held at Luzern. Sixteen survivors appeared. They made sentimental speeches and, to rekindle old memories, dined on a menu of "Potage Purée de Libby beans, vol-au-vent à la Gettisburgh [and] Filet piqué (importé de Chickamauga)." For dessert the old soldiers had "Texas Leckerli."¹⁰

Some Swiss soldiers joined the Union Army for money and excitement. Others considered they owed the United States a
David Habegger

Photograph

Courtesy of Mrs. F. L. Habegger, Highland, Illinois

David Habegger enlisted in the Union Army at Highland, Illinois, a Swiss community near St. Louis which furnished many members of 15th Missouri Regiment, the Swiss Rifles, whose distinctive flag featured the Swiss cross on a red field and 34 stars on a blue field. Habegger himself was a saddler in the 16th Illinois Cavalry.
debt of gratitude. "Are not Switzerland and the United States sisters," they reasoned. "Have not thousands of our compatriots found a new, equally beautiful homeland across the wide sea?" Still others claimed that their motives were idealistic. Frey said he was "inspired by the idea of supporting the great cause of the republic." Rudolph Aschmann thought it "glorious to fight for an idea that is destined to bring freedom to all men."

The sensitivity of the Swiss soldiers to the issues at stake in the Civil War was just as keen in Switzerland itself, for a sizeable band on the political spectrum there—the radical and liberal parties—considered that they had a deep ideological stake in the outcome in America. The Union, they believed, was fighting on a more massive scale the same battle they had fought fourteen years earlier against the uncompromising forces of local sovereignty, mobilized on behalf of a morally intolerable institution. The United States, wrote the Gazette de Lausanne in a prescient article of 31 May 1861, "is faced with the crisis we confronted in 1847 in the war of the Sonderbund. In Switzerland the quarrel was over the Jesuits; in the United States it is about Negroes. The result will probably be the same: the consolidation and aggrandizement of the central power. . . . It is a repetition en grand of our history during the years 1845 to 1848."

The losers in the Sonderbund war, the catholic-conservative cantons, also saw history repeating itself in America. They sympathized with the South in its desire for state sovereignty, but rejected slavery on religious grounds; their attitude toward the Southern Confederacy was, therefore, ambivalent. Only among the textile manufacturing interests in Zurich was there undiluted support for the South and for secession.

Many Swiss supporters of the Union, especially in the radical camp, believed that the cause of the North was, literally, their own cause. If the Union failed, Swiss radicals feared that their own experiment in republican federalism, which was modelled after the United States, would be discredited and would become vulnerable to foreign or domestic foes. The success of the South would "threaten freedom even in their own house," Swiss radicals declared. The Confederacy was denounced as a "death threatening cancer in the body of common freedom," a menace to the "life nerve (Lebensnerv) of the Republic itself." The cause for which the Union fought, Swiss radicals claimed, was "nothing more or less than our own life principle." The radicals became anxious when the Union appeared to falter, as it did early in 1863; they trembled, wrote the Basler Nachrichten, about the "future of the greatest, most powerful, most beautiful Free state of the world and of all time." They prayed that a "spirit might arise like Washington's,
Prisoner of war

Photograph

Courtesy of the Staatsarchiv, Basel

This photograph was found in the papers of Emil Frey, the first Swiss minister to the United States (1882) and President of the Swiss Confederation (1894). A captain in the 82nd Illinois Regiment, Frey was captured at Gettysburg and held for eighteen months in Libby Prison, Richmond, one of the many notorious Confederate jails. Frey spent some of his confinement in the “black hole,” subsisting on cooked rats, and looked like the forlorn figure in this photograph during the harsh conditions of his captivity.
simultaneously strong and gentle,” a spirit that would save the Union in its hour of peril.\textsuperscript{19}

The radicals were jubilant when the Union prevailed in 1865. They channeled their exuberance into the “Adressenbewegung” (Address movement) in which twenty thousand Swiss from all walks of life—from men’s choirs, rifle clubs, workers’ clubs—signed more than three hundred petitions, sympathizing with the sister republic on the loss of Lincoln and congratulating it for its momentous victory over secession which forever “validated the intrinsic strength of republican institutions.”\textsuperscript{20} These petitions were delivered to the American minister in Bern and transmitted by him to the President and Congress. Their flavor can be appreciated by sampling the most influential address, the widely copied Bern manifesto, written by Florian Gengel, editor of the Bund.

On your side of the Ocean now stands reborn a powerful, great republic, superior to all enemies. With indigenous strength has the American people conquered the disease that toppled the splendid republics of antiquity and threatened it with ruin. Rejuvenated, the American republic stands for eternity, the model and shield of freedom. The republic will be free in the future and in history. Who can still deny that republics can exist among large numbers of people. This victory is a world historical event, an event for all mankind . . . the hearts of all free men beat faster in the elevated hope that the cause of freedom will also be victorious in Europe; above all the Swiss rejoice that the victory is a guarantee that the republic will never fail but will put down deeper roots . . . let our principle be that both sister republics may be united. The cause of democracy and of the republic must prevail!”\textsuperscript{21}

George Müller has aptly described the address movement as “unofficial politics, direct spiritual contact between one people and another.”\textsuperscript{22} But Swiss radicals wanted something more substantial than spiritual communion to commemorate the victory of the sister republic. They wanted something that would place their country’s “new Connection with the United States in the spirit of freedom and republicanism eternally before the Eyes” of their fellow citizens.\textsuperscript{23} They hit upon the idea of commissioning a well-known Solothurn painter and radical sympathizer, Frank Buchser, to paint a large mural at the Federal Palace at Bern of the leading figures of the American Civil War; juxtaposed with the Americans would be an equally large mural of the heroes of Swiss history. Thus the “living Sympathy and Friendship between both republican nations” would be commemorated by a “visible and lasting monument.”\textsuperscript{24}
Menu, Swiss Union Army veterans' reunion, 1899

Printed document

Courtesy of the Staatsarchiv, Basel

On 22 January 1899, a group of Swiss veterans of the Union Army assembled for a reunion luncheon at Muth's Bavarian Beerhall in Luzern. The menu reminded the old soldiers of past battles and experiences. Leckerli is a Swiss cake, a kind of sweet biscuit, often with icing.
The radicals organized a fundraising campaign and sent Buchser to the United States with letters of introduction to various luminaries. He painted President Andrew Johnson, Secretary of State William Seward, and Generals Grant, Lee, and Sherman. Buchser was impressed with the military men, all of whom were of "more value than these intriguing sneakers and profane swindlers [and] wirepullers who hereabouts are called politicians."25 Although the project of the Civil War mural in the Federal Palace never materialized, Buchser's paintings of Generals Lee and Sherman now hang on the walls of the Swiss ambassador's residence in Washington, a memorial to an earlier age's sense of community between the sister republics.

NOTES

1. George Müller, Der amerikanische Sezessionskrieg in der schweizerischen öffentlichen Meinung (Basel, 1944), 22.
2. Getulius Kellersberger, Erlebnisse eines schweizerischen Ingenieurs in Californien, Mexico und Texas zur Zeit des amerikanischen Bürgerkrieges, 1861-1865 (Zurich, 1896).
4. Ibid., 135.
6. See also Wiley Sword, Sharpshooter (Lincoln, R.I., 1988).
7. For Lieb, see Albert Bartholdi, compiler, Prominent Americans of Swiss Origin (New York, 1932), 82–4.
10. Ibid.
11. The menu is in the Frey Archives, 485 D, VIII, 4, Staatsarchiv, Basel.
16. Ibid., 43.
17. Ibid., 43–5.
18. Ibid., 36.
19. Ibid., 58.
20. Ibid., 82.
22. Ibid., 171.
23. Ibid., 82.
24. Ibid., 82.