Swiss and the American Revolution

The Swiss made a significant contribution to the creation of the American Republic. They furnished intellectual weapons to American statesmen and troops and ordnance to Washington's armies. So little is known, however, about their military contribution to the patriot cause that the Swiss can be considered the invisible men of the American Revolution, as anonymous as black Americans were until the scholarship of the past two decades uncovered their substantial participation in the achievement of American independence.

The Swiss were invisible because their language disguised their national identity; most of them spoke German and their American contemporaries assumed that anyone speaking that tongue must, obviously, be a "German." Another reason the Swiss have been overlooked is because they have been undercounted by scholars, who currently assume that no more than 25,000 sons and daughters of Helvetia emigrated to America during the eighteenth century. This figure was proposed in 1916 by a professor of literature, Albert Faust, who derived it by extrapolating from a list of Zurich emigrants to America from 1734 to 1744.¹ No modern demographer would accept Faust's calculations, for they are based on the obvious fallacy that the Zurich experience in that decade was identical to the experiences in all other cantons, i.e., Faust assumes that, if x people left Zurich at a particular time, 2x simultaneously left a place twice as large. The Zurich list, moreover, includes those who left with official permission and paid emigration fees amounting to as much as 18 percent of their property.² How many left surreptitiously, to avoid paying these fees, is unknown to Faust or any other investigator.³ Another problem with Faust's figures is that the "high tide of Swiss emigration to America" occurred in 1749–1754, not in 1734–44, as he assumed.⁴

Faust's most serious error, however, was his failure to account for the Swiss who came to America via other countries.
"A beautiful song about the chief Swiss Son of Liberty, William Tell"

Woodcut

Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

William Tell's famous feat is shown on the title page of a songbook published in Philadelphia in 1768 by Henry Miller (Johann Henrich Müller), the most influential German-language printer in colonial America. A Swiss who served his apprenticeship in Basel, Miller (1702–1782) intended to commend American resistance to Great Britain to his German-language readers by suggesting that William Tell himself would have been a Son of Liberty, the name of organized American opponents of Great Britain in 1768.
Mobility, as Bernard Bailyn has recently written, was “endemic in southwestern Germany; throughout the Rhine Valley [and] in parts of Switzerland” during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Many Swiss moved first to the Palatinate or to other parts of Germany and then on to America where their new countrymen considered them as “Palatines.” From 1727 to 1734, for example, the official policy of the customs service in Pennsylvania was to call all German speaking arrivals “Palatines,” even though boatloads of these Palatines can be shown to have been Swiss. The point here is not that all “Palatines” or “Germans” who entered America were Swiss; a considerable number were, however, and neither they nor any other Swiss who came to America after a stop along the way were counted by Professor Faust. How many of the 200,000 or more “Germans” who are assumed to have emigrated to the thirteen colonies before independence were actually Swiss? We do not know, but the numbers were surely higher than current scholarly computations.

That large numbers of Swiss were among the German-speaking population in America was taken for granted by the revolutionary period’s most influential German-language newspaper publisher, Henry Miller (Johann Heinrich Möller). Scholars consider Miller to be the single most influential person in enlisting America’s “Germans” in support of the independence of the United States. This “German” tribune of American liberties, Henry Miller, was a Swiss, whose indirect path to America was similar to that of many of his countrymen. Born in 1702 of Swiss parents who had migrated to Rhoden, Germany, Miller moved back to Switzerland in 1715 and served a five-year apprenticeship in the Basel print shop of Johann Ludwig Brandmüller. He traveled around Europe, lived in London, and settled in Philadelphia in 1762. For the next seventeen years Miller published, under various titles, his German-language newspaper which circulated throughout the continent from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Ebenezer, Georgia.

Unlike the earliest Swiss emigrants, who were primarily Mennonites or members of other pacifist sects, Miller was a Lutheran, then a Moravian, who had no scruples against participation in partisan politics or against bearing arms. He waded into the dispute with the British as soon as it began. His frequent use of heroic men and events from Swiss history to generate support for the American cause indicates that he assumed that a large number of his readers were Swiss. Thus, in 1768, when Sons of Liberty mobilized throughout the colonies to force the repeal of British taxes, Miller illustrated the rectitude of their efforts by printing a “beautiful song” about the “principal Swiss Son of Liberty (Schweizerische Erz-Freiheitsohn),” William Tell, complete with a picture
readers. Henry Miller published in the 35 July 1776 issue of his newspaper, the Pennsylvania State Packet, a sentimental war story. "Das Heldentum des Rittern" by the Swiss writer, Salvator Faller (1710-1788), is a story of chivalry and honor. The hero, a young Swiss soldier, seeks to save his love through valor and bravery.

In an effort to stimulate martial spirit among the Swiss and German forces, the Pennsylvania State Packet, 26 July 1776, published several articles on Swiss and German military history. The newspaper highlighted the bravery and valor of Swiss soldiers during the Revolutionary War. A notable article discussed the Swiss role in the Battle of Monmouth, where they fought against British forces led by General Cornwallis. The Swiss forces, led by General de la Motte, demonstrated their skill and courage in battle.

The Pennsylvania State Packet also featured a letter from a Swiss soldier stationed in New York. The letter described the daily life of the soldiers, the challenges they faced, and their longing for home. The soldier expressed his hope to return to Switzerland as soon as the war ended.

The newspaper also included advertisements for various goods and services, including books, maps, and musical instruments. The advertisements were accompanied by detailed descriptions and prices, catering to the needs of the local community.

One of the articles highlighted the importance of education and culture during the Revolutionary War. The Pennsylvania State Packet encouraged the establishment of schools and libraries to provide education to the soldiers and their families. The newspaper also featured articles on the latest developments in science, including advances in medicine and technology.

The final article in the issue was a letter from a Swiss diplomat in Paris. The diplomat described the diplomatic efforts to secure support from European countries for the American cause. The letter emphasized the importance of maintaining good relations with France and other European nations to ensure the success of the American Revolution.

Overall, the Pennsylvania State Packet, 26 July 1776, provided a comprehensive overview of the Swiss and German involvement in the Revolutionary War, as well as the daily life of the soldiers. The newspaper served as a source of inspiration and information for its readers, highlighting the bravery and commitment of the Swiss and German forces.
showing Tell shooting the apple from his son’s head in the presence of Gessler and his henchmen.

In 1775 Miller formed a partnership in patriotic propaganda with a fellow Swiss, the Reverend John Joachim Zublich, who had come to Philadelphia to represent Georgia at the Continental Congress. Born and educated in St. Gallen, Switzerland, Zublich was ordained at the “German Church” in London in 1744 and took a pulpit in Savannah, Georgia, in 1760, after living for a time in the Swiss colony in Purrysburg, South Carolina. In 1774 Zublich published a pamphlet in London, *Great Britain’s Right to Tax . . . By a Swiss* which Miller distributed in America. In this work Zublich adumbrated a thesis which he would develop in subsequent writings—that Britain’s treatment of America was identical to Austria’s repression of Switzerland in the epic years of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—and advised his British readers to remember, as they boasted of their ability to subdue their colonies, that “all the power of the house of Austria could not re-conquer a handful of Swiss.”

In 1775 Miller published Zublich’s *The Law of Liberty. A Sermon on American Affairs . . . with an Appendix, giving a concise Account of the Struggles of Swisserland to recover their Liberty.* Simultaneously, Miller translated the appendix into German and issued it as a pamphlet entitled, *Eine kurzgefasste historische Nachricht von den Kämpfen der Schweizer für die Freiheit.* In describing the *Struggles of Switzerland,* Zublich expanded on the Austrian-British analogy, arguing that George III and Leopold of Austria, some five centuries earlier, were following the same policy: “The design was . . . to excite an insurrection among the inhabitants, and then, under pretence of being rebellious, to make war upon them, and entirely to bring them under the yoke . . . in different times and places, tyranny makes use of the same arts.” Zublich described the remarkable Swiss victories of the fourteenth century at Morgarten, Sempach, and Näfels, each achieved by a handful of Helvetians over a host of Austrians, and left his Swiss readers in no doubt that the American cause required them to summon the same measure of indomitable courage on behalf of their new homeland. To emphasize the similarities between the Swiss and American experiences, Zublich reminded his readers that Austrian oppression produced a Swiss confederacy “first only of three men, by degrees of three small countries, which increased gradually to thirteen cantons.” Thirteen states were, of course, assembled at that moment in Philadelphia to oppose the latter-day Leopold.

For all of his rhetorical fervor, Zublich could not accept independence, because “Republican Government,” as he lectured the Continental Congress, “is little better than Government of Devils. I have been acquainted with it from 6 years old.”
in other words, that independence would produce the social turmoil that he associated with republicanism in his native Switzerland, Zubly cast his lot with the King in 1776. Miller never waivered in his support of the American cause and achieved the distinction of being the first printer in the United States to publish the news (5 July 1776) of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. Three weeks later, to raise the martial spirit among his Swiss readers, Miller printed Salomon Gessner’s sentimental war story, “The Wooden Leg (Das Hölzene Bein),” which described the efforts of an aging survivor of the “battle of Näfels in Canton Clarus in the year 1388” to find the man who saved his life on that heroic field. High in the Alps the old veteran, hobbling on his wooden leg, finally found his rescuer’s son, herding goats. He gave the young man riches and his beautiful daughter’s hand in marriage and the young lovers, naturally, lived happily ever after. Whether Miller’s publication of Gessner’s story had an equally happy effect in procuring recruits for the Continental Army is unknown.

We do not know how many Swiss bore arms for the United States during the Revolutionary War. It has recently been estimated that between 200,000 and 250,000 men served in American units during the war. George Bancroft assumed that one eighth of the American Army was “German.” If this guess—and it is no better than that—is correct, perhaps 30,000 “Germans” fought for American independence. Of these 30,000 “Germans” as many as 10,000 may have been Swiss. The point here is not that Germans and Swiss “won” the War for Independence, only that their role in that conflict can not be overlooked.

In a few cases it is possible to identify Swiss fighting units like Lindemuth’s company, Third Battalion, Berks County, Pennsylvania militia. In a few more cases we know the names of Swiss artisans and merchants who contributed to the war effort. Jean-Daniel Schweighauser of Basel, for example, served during the early years of the war as American consul at Nantes and supervised the shipment of desperately needed French arms and ammunitions to the Continental Army. Some Swiss made rifles for Washington’s soldiers in their shops in America. The Pennsylvania or Kentucky rifle, which evolved from the “Swiss-Jaeger” rifle, was apparently “invented” by the Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, gunsmith, Martin Meylin, whose family emigrated from Hedingen, canton of Zurich. Other Swiss gunsmiths in the Lancaster area were expert fabricators of the Pennsylvania rifle and during the Revolutionary War produced these weapons for the Continental Army as well as for state troops.

The war record of at least one Swiss artisan-entrepreneur, John Jacob Faesch, is extremely well documented. Faesch was
born and educated in Basel, but moved to Neuwied, Germany, before emigrating to New Jersey in 1764. Characteristically, to Faesch's new countrymen he was not a Swiss but a "smart little Dutchman." Having learned the iron-making business in Germany, Faesch settled in Morris County, New Jersey, one of the best sources of iron ore in the colonies, and by 1773 he was producing high quality iron products at Mount Hope. An ardent patriot, Faesch made iron chains to obstruct the Hudson River and produced various kinds of ammunition, shells, casings, and cannon for Washington's army. According to the commander of the Continental Artillery, Henry Knox, Faesch's armaments were far superior to Pennsylvania-made ordnance and Washington interested himself in Faesch's operations, visiting him at Mount Hope on several occasions. The iron master felt confident enough in his friendship with the General to write him in 1795, recommending a friend for a federal job.

The Swiss furnished American Revolutionary leaders with intellectual weapons every bit as potent as the products of Faesch's forges. The best known Swiss thinker of the Revolutionary period, Jean Jacques Rousseau, had little impact on American statesmen. They were acquainted with some of his books, but his favorite topics were not relevant to their concerns. Rousseau's "celebration of primitive simplicity," a recent scholar has stressed, was "un congenial for societies that throughout their histories had been trying desperately to escape from exactly that condition." Two other Swiss savants, Jean Jacques Burlamaqui and Emmerich de Vattel, known today only to academic specialists, had substantial influence on American statesmen. Burlamaqui (1694–1748) was, like Rousseau, born in Geneva, but never deserted his native city. He was a respected member of the Geneva Council of State and a professor of ethics and natural law at the city's university. Vattel (1714–1767), a native of Neuchâtel, was a pupil of Burlamaqui and a thinker of less originality. Burlamaqui's major work, Principles of Natural Law, was published in French at Geneva in 1747 and translated into English the next year. Vattel's The Law of Nations, or the Principles of Natural Law... was published in French in 1758 and then quickly translated into English.

Americans quoted Burlamaqui and Vattel frequently in the pamphlet warfare with British partisans which began in the 1760s. Their popularity stemmed from their explication of natural law, a subject which many Americans had not mastered but which they perceived could be used as an antidote to the "new" British constitutional doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty under which the King in Parliament laid claim to absolute authority in his dominions. The Swiss writers were read with heightened attention
Jean Jacques Burlamaqui (1694–1748)

Painting (copy)

Château de Penthes, Geneva

A public official and professor at Geneva, Burlamaqui produced works on the natural law which were widely admired by the leaders of the American Revolution. Thomas Jefferson was particularly impressed with Burlamaqui. American scholars have argued that Jefferson may have borrowed some of the most familiar phrases in the Declaration of Independence (e.g., “the pursuit of happiness,”) from Burlamaqui.
Principes du Droit Naturel (Geneva, 1747)

Book

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The most widely read of Burlamaqui's works in America.
as the constitutional conflict reached its crescendo at the First Continental Congress in 1774. An observer of the Congress wrote James Madison, 17 October 1774, that "by what I was told Vattel, Barlemaqui [sic], Locke, and Montesquieu seem to be the standards to which they refer when settling the rights of the colonies or when a dispute arises on the justice or propriety of a measure." 17

Two years later Burlamaqui was still a beacon for American statesmen. Although scholars have long been aware that Jefferson admired the Swiss writer, no one has appraised the Genevan’s influence on the Virginian as generously as Morton White, who has recently argued that Burlamaqui was the primary source of some of Jefferson’s most arresting language in the Declaration of Independence. According to White, Jefferson regarded Burlamaqui as having uttered “the last word . . . with regard to natural law as it affected individuals." 18 Specifically, it is to Burlamaqui that White attributes Jefferson’s distinctive alteration in the drafting of the Declaration of Blackstone’s trinity of absolute rights—life, liberty, and property—to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. 19 If White is right, the most memorable phrase in the American political vocabulary has a Swiss accent.

The commitment of American lawyers and politicians to natural law and natural rights began to wane in the nineteenth century and, as it did, the influence of authorities on those subjects like Burlamaqui and Vattel diminished. Joseph Story cited both writers with respect in his Commentaries on the Constitution (1833) 20 but after the Civil War few Americans consulted the Swiss writers. Today they are known only to academic specialists. History, nevertheless, has been kinder to them than to the Swiss soldiers of the American Revolution who, since their identities were never known, can not even be said to have been forgotten. With the sword and with the pen, the Swiss, nevertheless, played a role in the events of 1776, a role that was certainly more substantial than heretofore realized.

NOTES

1. Albert B. Faust, "Swiss Emigration to the American Colonies in the Eighteenth Century," American Historical Review, 22 (Oct. 1916), 43-44. For the use by modern scholars of Faust’s figures, see Leo Schelbert’s excellent study, Swiss Migration to America: The Swiss Mennonites (New York, 1980), 96.
3. In 1772, for example, the official in Basel responsible for emigration did not know how many people had left the canton. Faust, *List of Swiss Emigrants in the Eighteenth Century to the American Colonies*, 2 (Washington, 1925), 84.
7. For the number of German immigrants to the thirteen colonies, see Lester Cappon, ed., *Atlas of Early American History: The Revolutionary Era, 1760–1790* (Princeton, 1976), 24, 98.
20. i.e., 3, 722 n.