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Foreword

A Forgotten Chapter of our Military History

David Vogelsanger

More Swiss participated in the American Civil War than in any other foreign conflict except the Battle of Marignano in 1515 and Napoleon's Russian Campaign of 1812. This work has rescued this important and little-known fact from oblivion, and it is a privilege to introduce this concise study by my friend, Heinrich L. Wirz, and his collaborator, Florian A. Strahm. Mostly as volunteers, the Swiss fought either to maintain the Union, or they risked their lives for the independence of the South. These men believed it was honorable to fight for their new homeland where they had migrated in search of prosperity. Many men fought for the ideals of their respective countries, but relatively few risked their lives either for the abolition of slavery or for its preservation. These men often shared the same political ideals that were the founding principles of modern Switzerland, including freedom and independence. As men with high ideals, they deserve our respect.

The American Civil War merits the interest of Swiss, for the present-day political system of Switzerland also emerged from a brief and less bloody, internal conflict called the *Sonderbundskrieg*, (Sonderbund War) that also ended with the victory of the "Union."

The Union Army had many more Swiss in it than did the Confederate Army because most of the Swiss had migrated to regions of the North where agricultural or business opportunities were more easily found. The Fifteenth Missouri Infantry Regiment was largely a Swiss unit and was called "the Swiss Rifles." The commander of the unit was Colonel Francis J. Joliat, an immigrant from the Canton of Bern. During Grant's Chattanooga Campaign in Tennessee, the Swiss planted their flag on Missionary Ridge on 26 November 1863. The regiment carried a flag that combined the Swiss Cross with that of the United States.

A Company of the famous First United States Sharpshooters, the Berdan Sharpshooters, had been recruited mainly from experienced Swiss target shooters and was called the "Swiss Company." Lieutenant Colonel Casper Trepp from Splügen in Graubünden, and officer with experience under Giuseppe Garibaldi in Italy and the Crimean War seems to have been the creator of such specialized U.S. sharpshooter units. Such units already had a long tradition in Switzerland. Trepp commanded Company A and later the entire regiment. He was killed at the Battle of Mine Run Virginia on 30 November 1863 and is buried in New York City.

Other Union units with companies comprised entirely of Swiss troopers were the Thirty-ninth and Eighty-third New York Volunteer Infantry Regiments. The Thirty-ninth New York was better known as the Garibaldi Guard and the Eighty-third first existed as the Ninth New York Militia. It was also known as the City Guard. The commander of the regiment was Colonel Joseph A. Moesch, whose family originated in the Aargau Canton. He was killed at the Battle of the Wilderness on 6 May 1864. A monument erected in his honor stands on the battlefield. On the Confederate side, a Swiss company probably existed in Louisiana. Many thousands of Swiss also fought in various units of the states, both North and South, they were living in at the start of the war.

No systematic count of all Swiss troopers has ever been created. Even though Wirz and Strahm have done much to bring the Swiss from obscurity, a complete count will probably remain impossible due to a lack of sources. The Union produced nearly complete regimental lists exist, but fewer such thorough counts for Confederate units are available. The situation is complicated by the fact that many surnames were changed to accommodate English spellings, and the national origins of these names are often impossible to determine. Some prominent personalities, however, have been carefully studied. Among them is the Confederate Brigadier General John D. Imboden, who led a courageous rear-guard action after the Battle of Gettysburg, allowing for many wounded men to be brought over the Potomac River to safety. Felix J. Zollicoffer, another Confederate Brigadier General, was killed in 1862.

He had come from a long line of officers from St. Gallen, Switzerland and was active in Tennessee politics before the war.

The story of Henry Wirz is most tragic. He was from Zurich, and he became a victim of “the malice of the age.” Wirz was a Confederate sergeant when he was seriously wounded in battle. Soon after, he was promoted to captain. He possibly went on a diplomatic mission for the Confederacy to Europe. Upon his return, he was appointed commander of the infamous Andersonville prison (Camp Sumter) in Georgia. General John H. Winder was over all prisoner-of-war camps in the South. Winder might have been partially responsible for the poor conditions in the camp, but he died before the war’s end and could not be punished. The foreigner, Wirz, who honestly but perhaps inefficiently tried to improve conditions at the camp became the North’s scapegoat. After a show trial, devoid of any justice, he was condemned to death. He was executed at the exact spot where the Supreme Court Building now stands. Ironically, these words are chiseled on the building’s edifice: EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER THE LAW.

Many other men from Switzerland or who had a Swiss background also served in the war. The most well-known among them is certainly Emil Frey from the Canton Basel-Landschaft. After the war, he served as Swiss ambassador to the United States, as commander of a division of the Swiss Army, and also as Federal Councilor and Chief of the Military Department of Switzerland. Before the Civil War, he traveled to visit relatives in Highland, Illinois. He joined the Union Army at the outset of the war and rose to the rank of major. Frey was captured at the Battle of Gettysburg. He survived great hardships but survived and participated in uniform in the Union’s victory parade in Washington, D.C., in May 1865. At the turn of the twentieth century, he organized two meetings of Swiss veterans of the Union Army in Switzerland.

The Union Brigadier General Hermann Lieb from Canton Thurgau was also very important. He organized the Fifth U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery, which was an African American artillery regiment that

fought in the Vicksburg campaign under General Ulysses S. Grant. Lieb was later appointed as the commander of all Union artillery at Vicksburg.

Not only have the authors featured the accomplishments of many of the well-known Swiss but also their lesser-known countrymen. Through detailed research, Wirz and Strahm have uncovered numerous names of Swiss officers in the Union Army as well as the Confederacy. Perhaps some future comprehensive study will provide more details on the Swiss in the American Civil War.

Note: David Vogelsanger has a Ph.D. in history and serves currently as Ambassador of Switzerland to New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. He also studies military history, particularly the American Civil War.