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Swiss Officers and Prominent Personalities

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2. Swiss Officers and Prominent Personalities

“Eight companies of Germans and Irish hailed from Georgia, and in Louisiana a ‘Foreign legion’ was established that had a company each of Belgians and Swiss.”

Jan Boger, German military writer, 1988

The United States census of 1860 listed 53,327 Swiss-born residents who represented 1.3 percent of the foreign-born in the nation. John (Johannes) Hitz, Sr. (1797–1864), Swiss Consul General from 1853–1864 in Washington, D.C., estimated the number of Swiss serving during the Civil War in the Union Army at 6,000. In his 1862 register of names, he listed 537 Swiss in the military. In 1863, he included an additional 302 men. He presented no separate lists for 1861, 1864, and 1865. Paul de Vallière stated that 4,000 Swiss served in the Union Army in his monumental work of 1940, *Treue und Ehre. Geschichte der Schweizer in Fremden Diensten* [Loyalty and Honor. A History of the Swiss in Foreign Service]. No reliable estimates for the number of Swiss fighting in the Confederate Army are available.

“Register of the Swiss Doing or Having Done Service in the Union Army of America”

After Hitz’s death, his son John Hitz, Jr. (1828–1908), served as the Swiss Consul General from 1864 to 1881.

In his dispatch to Swiss officials sent on 29 August 1862 John Hitz, Sr. reported:

“Data are missing about very many regiments that in part passed through Washington or went to southern ports by other routes. From the regiments in the West, we could get but two registers. As to the full number of Swiss serving in the Union Army the following estimate might not be wholly incorrect. According to our register there are 537 Swiss among some 50 regiments. If one puts the number of a regiment at

about 1,000 men the whole army of 600,000 might count no fewer than some 6,000 Swiss.”

In this case the Swiss did not fight for foreign emperors or kings, but as immigrants for their new country, most of them for the Northern States. The personal, military, political, and economic ties between Switzerland and the United States during the Civil War were numerous. In his 1944 book *Der amerikanische Sezessionskrieg in der schweizerischen öffentlichen Meinung* [The American Civil War in Swiss Public Opinion] George Müller observed that the American war had evoked remembrance of the Swiss Civil War of 1847 and that Switzerland provided humanitarian assistance to the Union. “Somehow help for the Union also implied protection and shield for one’s own country’s ideology. One could only earn the favor of the victorious sister republic if one proved to be worthy of the common goals and traits and forcefully pursued them.”

Highlights of the Careers of Soldiers

In 1865 Captain Rudolf Aschmann published a report of his experiences in the book *Three Years in the Army of the Potomac*, reissued by Heinz K. Meier in 1972. In the war, he was crippled by losing a leg. He mentions other Swiss who served in the Union Army including Colonel Joseph A. Moesch and John H. Kuhn as well as first lieutenants Isaac Rutishauser and Caspar Trepp. The latter was killed in 1863 at the battle of Mine Run in Virginia. Two thirds of the officers and soldiers of the Fifteenth Missouri Volunteer Infantry Regiment were Swiss, as Heinz K. Meier writes. Its first commander was Colonel Francis J. Joliat, a native of the Bernese Jura, his successor was the German John Weber. The unit was also called the Swiss Rifles or the Swiss Regiment and had as its banner a special flag, a combination of the United States flag with the Swiss cross.

Among Swiss volunteers was the Major Emil Frey, later a member of the Swiss Federal Council. Also included was Ferdinand Lecomte, a major in the Swiss army and aide-de-camp of the Union

General, George Brinton McClellan (1826–1885). Lecomte later became a division commander in Switzerland. Friedrich Arnold Schumacher, artilleryist in the Confederate Army, became a colonel, and chief of armament of the artillery. Hermann Lieb rose from infantry soldier to the rank of a Union General. Two descendants of Swiss immigrants became brigadier generals of the Confederate States. Felix Kirk Zollicoffer descended from the Zollikofer family of Altenklingen, a castle at Märstetten in Canton Thurgau, and he was a member of the United States House of Representatives. He was mortally wounded in the battle of Mill Springs at Logan's Cross Roads in Kentucky. John Daniel Imboden commanded the Sixty-second Virginia Mounted Infantry Regiment. At the start of 1863 he became a brigadier general, and his brigade covered the Confederate retreat after the battle of Gettysburg. In the winter of 1865 he visited the prisoner-of-war camp at Andersonville, Georgia, and praised the efforts of Captain Henry Wirz for helping the captives. He later came to Washington, DC, to give evidence in support of Wirz, but he was not allowed to testify.

Major Julius Getulius Kellenberger was in Texas at the start of hostilities and joined the Confederate Army. He returned to Switzerland after the war and was the only Confederate veteran among the sixteen men who attended the first of two meetings of Civil War veterans that convened in Luzern in January 1899. Heinrich Hotze was born in Rümlang, Canton Zurich, became a U.S. citizen in 1856 in Mobile, Alabama. In 1858 he became the *Chargé d'affaires* at the U.S. embassy in Brussels and a year later co-editor of the *Mobile Register*. In 1861 he served in the Third Alabama Infantry Regiment. Because of his intelligence and journalistic experience, the Confederate War Minister LeRoy Pope Walker (1817–1884) ordered Hotze to London to serve as a commercial agent and unofficial propagandist for the Confederacy. Henry Hotze established a kind of press agency, issued the weekly *The Index*, and became the leading advocate of the Southern States in Europe. He might have met Henry Wirz in 1863 when Wirz was on his supposed secret presidential mission to the Confederate emissaries in London and Paris. In August 1865, Henry Hotze had to give up his newspaper for

economic reasons, and he worked as a journalist in England and France. He then returned to Switzerland and died in Zug where he is buried. He was one of several Civil War veterans who died in Switzerland.

The Swiss surgeon, Alfred Conrad Girard, landed in New York in November 1864 and passed the examination for military physicians. He took part in the destructive winter campaign of General William Tecumseh Sherman (1820–1891) through the State of Georgia to Savannah. Meanwhile thousands of suffering Union captives languished in Fort Sumter at Andersonville in Georgia, waiting in vain for a prisoner exchange or to be liberated by nearby Union troops. After the Civil War, Girard became a military physician in the United States Army, a citizen of the United States, and in 1905 was promoted to brigadier general. In January 1914 he was buried at Arlington cemetery with military honors.

Henry Wirz: A Widely-Known Swiss

Hartmann Heinrich Wirz was born 25 November 1823 in Zurich. His father, Johann Caspar, was a military tailor, chief of the artisans, and from 1834 to 1853 the administrator of the city store, a kind of duty-free shop. He was a member of the large city council (1831–1859) as well as church warden of the *Prediger*, later the *Fraumünster* parish. Between 1839 and 1853, he served three times as master of the tailor's guild. His son, Hartmann Heinrich, attended elementary and secondary schools from 1828 to 1835 and the lower *Gymnasium* of Zurich's cantonal school from 1835 to 1840 where he was probably a member of the corps of cadets. From 1840 to 1842 he underwent schooling as a merchant in Zurich and Turin, Italy. He is listed in the family register as merchant and entered the employment of his father as assistant at the city-store, served as secretary of the *Fraumünster* parish from 1844 to 1847, and achieved membership in the tailor's guild. Most likely, he was also a member of the city's militia. He married on 15 September 1845 and later ran up a debt of 2,400 francs.

Early in 1847 discrepancies including the loss of a box of silk were noted and Johann Caspar Wirz prompted an official investigation against "unknown." The police arrested his son, and in February, bankruptcy

proceedings were initiated against him. He was unable to repay his debts, and he was sentenced to four years in prison. In 1848 he was released and expelled from Zurich for a period of twelve years. After a visit to Moscow, Henry, as he then called himself, boarded the two-master ship *Sarah Boyd* in Le Havre and arrived in New York in April 1849. He spent time in Massachusetts, and then in Kentucky where he married a widow who had two daughters. He worked as a homeopath, and then became a plantation manager in Kentucky and Louisiana.

In May 1861 Henry Wirz entered the Confederate Army as a private and was assigned to the Fourth Battalion of the Madison Infantry, a volunteer unit from Louisiana. In August he was assigned to Brigadier General John Henry Winder (1800–1865) in Richmond. Wirz was advanced to the rank of sergeant, and Winder ordered him to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, to establish and administer a provisional prisoner-of-war-camp. At the two-day battle of Fair Oaks or Seven Pines, fought from 31 May to 1 June 1862, Wirz's right arm was seriously wounded. He was promoted to captain the same month. Appointed assistant adjutant general for special services to Brigadier General Winder, Wirz was put in charge of the military police and made commander of the prisoner-of-war camps at Libby and Belle Isle in Richmond, Virginia.

In 1863 Captain Wirz was furloughed for four months and traveled to Europe to have his arm treated. Supposedly, he also served as a secret emissary and courier on behalf of Jefferson Davis, the Confederacy's president. He might have visited the Confederate financial agents and diplomats James Murray Mason of Virginia in London and John Slidell of Louisiana in Paris. In 1864 Captain Wirz was made commander of the prisoner-of-war-camp at Andersonville, Georgia. In 1865 after the wars end he was in charge of the camp records. He remained in the camp in May when the last of the prisoners were released. He was arrested and brought to Washington, D.C., where he was put on trial in August. A military commission headed by General Lew Wallace (1827–1905), author of the novel *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880), condemned Henry Wirz to death by hanging on the basis of alleged war crimes. Despite a clemency plea to President Andrew

Johnson (1808–1875), he was killed before a large crowd on 10 November 1865. Since then his “*cause célèbre*” has not come to rest as an article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of 21 June 2012 observes.

Emil Frey and Ferdinand Lecomte, the Most Prominent Swiss

In December 1860, Emil Frey (1838–1922) of Canton Basellandschaft went with his cousin Theodore Chatoney of Murten, Canton Fribourg, to New York to get to know the country and its people and to expand their agricultural expertise. Frey first worked as a farm hand and day laborer in Highland, Illinois. When the Civil War broke out, Frey joined the Twenty-fourth Illinois Infantry Regiment under the command of the German-American Colonel Friedrich Hecker (1811–1881) on 18 June 1861. By the Swiss law of 30 July 1859, however, such “entry into military detachments abroad that were not recognized as national troops of that state” was only permitted “by express consent of the Federal Council” and only granted for the further development of “the aims of the [Swiss] patriotic military establishment.”

Frey’s experience was trying. He wrote his father in April 1862, “Oh, if only this damned war would go to hell.” In October 1862 the Eighty-second Illinois Infantry Regiment was organized. Part of it was Company H, which consisted mainly of Swiss, and it was commanded by Emil Frey who had been promoted to captain. He also recruited his cousin, Theodore Chatoney, who was a corporal. After the battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863, Frey was given the temporary rank of major and served as the substitute commander of the regiment. On 1 July 1863 he was captured on the first day of the Battle of Gettysburg along with Theodore Chatoney. He was imprisoned at the notorious Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia. There the paths of Frey and Wirz would cross. After suffering hard times for eighteen months, Frey was exchanged for a Confederate Captain Gordon who had been placed under a sentence of death. In September 1864 his cousin, Chatoney, died in Andersonville from scurvy. Emil Frey held Captain Henry Wirz personally responsible for his cousin’s death and publicly criticized the suggestion that a memorial be erected to Wirz in Switzerland. “Never in

a civilized nation have prisoners-of-war been so cruelly treated as in the pen of Andersonville under the command of Major Wirz” he claimed in the newspaper *Der Bund*, issued for 4/5 March in 1908. Union Corporal Chatoney is buried in the military cemetery that was established near the prisoner-of-war camp on 17 August 1865. Chatoney's name is wrongly given as J. Theo Chattering with the number 9095 among 12,914 men of the Union Army who are buried there.

After his return to Switzerland, the professional, military and political career of Emil Frey, a Liberal politician, was very successful. He became cantonal secretary (*Landschreiber*) and member of the governing council of Canton Basel-Landschaft. He was elected National Councilor, became Ambassador of Switzerland to the United States, and was then chosen by the Swiss Parliament as Federal Councilor in charge of the Military Department. He served as president of the Swiss Confederation in 1894. In addition, he was the director of the International Office of the Telegraph, a member of the General Staff, Commander of the Infantry Brigades, and temporarily commander of a military division in 1890. In 1904 he published the large-sized and richly-illustrated work *Die Kriegstaten der Schweiz, dem Volk erzählt* [The War Deeds of Switzerland, Told to the People]. He was given an honorary degree from the University of Bern in recognition of that book.

Ferdinand Lecomte (1826–1899) was first a journalist, then a librarian of Canton Vaud and a major on the Swiss General Staff. From 1862 to 1865 he participated in the Civil War for the Union and published several articles about his experiences. As officer of the Swiss militia, he became a Brigade Commander in 1866, Chief of Staff in 1870, and from 1875 to 1890 he served as Division Commander of the Second Division. From 1875 to 1899 he was Cantonal Secretary of Canton Vaud and founded the *Revue Militaire Suisse*. His son, Henri Lecomte (1869–1944) was the first European to attend West Point and the first foreigner to take the course for members of the General Staff in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Later, he rose to instruction officer of military engineering and colonel in the Swiss army.

In *Prominent Americans of Swiss Origin* Albert Bartholdi featured Edward Walter Eberle (1864–1929) as does Kevin D. Stringer in chapter nine of *Swiss-Made Heroes: Profiles in Military Leadership*. Eberle was the fifth son of Joseph Eberle of Walenstadt, Canton St. Gallen, a Swiss immigrant to the United States in 1846 and an officer in the Confederate Army. Edward Eberle grew up in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and attended the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis starting in 1881. He graduated in 1887 and, after service in various maritime assignments, returned to the Academy. In 1889 he received his officer commission as a naval lieutenant. In 1898 he participated in the Spanish-American War and, after further service, was commander of the Merchant Marine Academy from 1915 to 1918. He rose to the position of Rear Admiral in 1919 and of Chief of Naval Operations of the U.S. Navy. Eberle promoted innovative maritime technologies such as naval artillery and cordless transmission as well as the building of aircraft carriers and of a maritime air force. Two ships in the American Navy were named after him, the destroyer *USS Eberle* in 1940 and the transport ship *USS Admiral E. W. Eberle* in 1944. In 1929 he was buried in Arlington cemetery where also his son Edward Randolph Eberle (1890–1935), a lieutenant commander of the U.S. Navy, is interred.

The Bernese Federal Councilor Jakob Stämpfli (1820–1879) gained American respect when he represented the United States in the so-called *Alabama Claims* case, an international dispute between the United States and Great Britain. He quickly learned English and worked through the documents. The United States demanded indemnities because the *C.S.S. Alabama* and other Confederate ships that had been built in Great Britain had sunk a number of Union vessels in the war. In 1873 the court decided in favor of the United States which received 15.5 million in gold, corresponding to 78,000,000 Swiss francs. The *C.S.S. Alabama* was sunk by the *U.S. Kearsarge* in June 1864 near Cherbourg, France.