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Henry Wirz and Andersonville: The Career of the Most Controversial Swiss American

by Albert Winkler

While many Americans of Swiss descent have made valuable contributions to the development of the United States, Henry Wirz has often been viewed with disdain. He was the commander of the infamous Andersonville prison where nearly 13,000 Union prisoners died during the American Civil War, and he was one of the two men executed for war crimes relating to that conflict. Despite his conviction in court, much controversy surrounds his actions at Andersonville, and many writers have either condemned or praised him. This paper will review the career of Henry Wirz, examine his conduct at Andersonville, and analyze his trial to see if he was fairly convicted, or if he was condemned for the need of a scapegoat.

Although Wirz was an important historical figure, some scholars of the Swiss in America have ignored him entirely. *Prominent Americans of Swiss Origin* and *Swiss in American Life* do not mention Wirz even though the latter study includes enemies of the United States, John André (1750-1780) and Auguste Prévost (1723-1786). André was a British spy during the War of Independence who was hanged for his complicity in the treason of Benedict Arnold, and Prévost was a British general in the same conflict who inflicted a severe defeat on the Americans at the siege of Savannah, Georgia, in 1779.¹

Henry Wirz was born in Zurich on November 25, 1823. He wanted to be a physician, but his father, Hans Caspar Wirz, wanted his son to

¹ *Prominent Americans of Swiss Origin* (New York: White, 1932) and *Swiss in American Life* (Zurich: Müller, 1977), pp. 32-3. Swiss biographers more often include Wirz in their studies. See, Karl Lüönd, *Schweizer in Amerika* (Olten: Walter, 1979), pp. 131-8.

become a minister. As Henry later admitted, "My father wanted me to study for the pulpit; I did not like it. ... I had an inclination to study medicine, and he [his father] would not let me." The two men compromised, and the younger Wirz became a merchant. He married Emilie Oswald on Sept. 15, 1845, and she bore him two children, Louise Emilie in 1847 and Paul Emil in 1849.²

Early in 1847, Hans Caspar Wirz noticed discrepancies in the accounts of his business, and Henry was arrested on January 12 and found guilty of fraud and embezzlement on April 3. He was sentenced to four years in jail and went to the Ötenbach penitentiary. Due to ill health, the prisoner was released on June 6, 1848, and the city changed the remainder of his punishment to banishment from the Zurich Canton for twelve years. He then migrated to the United States, landing in New York in April 1849. His wife divorced him in 1853 for abandonment.³

Wirz went to Kentucky where he met and married Elizabeth Savells Wolf whose husband had died, leaving her with two young girls, Susie and Cornelia Wolf. The couple spoke their vows on May 28, 1854 at Cadiz, Kentucky, and they had two more daughters before the outbreak of the Civil War, but one died prior to the conflict.⁴

Henry Wirz was in Louisiana at the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 and joined the Confederate army as a private. His unit arrived in Virginia in the summer of 1861 and was given guard duty over Union prisoners in Richmond. Brigadier General John H. Winder, who had responsibility for the Union captives in that city, noticed Wirz's diligence in making lists of prisoners, and Winder soon made him a sergeant with additional duties. Wirz claimed he fought in the Battle of Fair Oaks (Seven Pines) May 31-June 1, 1862, where "I was wounded by a piece of shell. ... and have nearly lost the use of my right arm." It

² Henry Wirz, "His Life and History from his own Lips," Nov. 8, 1865 *New York Herald*, Nov. 9, 1865. Henry Wirz "Letter," in U. S. Secretary of War, *The Trial of Henry Wirz* 40th Cong., 2^d sess., House Executive Documents [Washington, D.C., 1868], p. 17. Hereafter cited as *Trial*. See also, Rolf Kieser "Hauptmann Henry Wirz und die Hintergründe des Andersonville-Prozesses," *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, 18, no. 1 (1968): p. 48; Orvid L. Futch, *History of Andersonville Prison* (np: University of Florida, 1968), p. 16; and Ruedi Studer, *Der Prozess gegen Captain Henry Wirz* (Nordhausen: Bautz, 2006), pp. 40-1.

³ Kieser, "Wirz," 48 and Futch, *Andersonville*, p. 16.

⁴ Wirz, "Life," Studer, *Der Prozess*, p. 40, and William Marvel, *Andersonville: the Last Depot* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 35-6.



Captain Henry Wirz, C.S.A.

Courtesy: Library of Congress

never healed, and the wound hurt him for the rest of his life. Despite his disability, Wirz advanced to the rank of captain on June 12, 1862, and he continued to work with prisoners.⁵

In 1863, Wirz received a furlough. "I went to Europe and had my wound operated upon at Paris. The doctor there thought that all the dead bone had come out." But the operation failed because "the wound broke open again" three or four months later. When Wirz returned on January 20, 1864, General Winder ordered him to report to Camp Sumter near Andersonville, Georgia, to help with the prisoner-of-war camp.⁶

The tragedy of Andersonville was caused by the policies on prisoners during the Civil War. A system of prisoner exchange broke down over the issue of African American captives in 1862 because the Confederacy refused to treat them as legitimate prisoners of war. By the end of 1863, the number of prisoners held by each side rose sharply. The conditions were poor in the prison camps both North and South, and mortality rates were high. According to the most reliable numbers: "211,411 Union soldiers were captured during the Civil War of which 16,668 were paroled [released] on the field and 30,218 died while in captivity; and that 462,634 Confederate soldiers were captured during the war, of which number 247,769 were paroled on the field and 25,976 died while in captivity." Subtracting those who were released immediately, 194,743 Union soldiers were incarcerated, and 30,218 died or 15.5%. 214,865 Confederate soldiers were also held, and 25,976 died or 12%.⁷ This meant that the conditions were similar in the camps of both the North and South because the death rates were comparable.

Many Confederate prisons were in or near Richmond, but the city suffered from shortages of all kinds by 1863, challenging public officials to meet the needs of civilians, soldiers, and prisoners of war. Confederate officials decided to remove the prisoners from the na-

⁵ Wirz, "Life;" Wirz "Letter" in Trial, 17; Studer, p. 42; Marvel, *Andersonville*, p. 36; and *The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901) series 2, vol. 3: p. 711. All citations in this work are from series 2, which deals with prisoners of war. Hereafter cited as *OR*.

⁶ Studer, pp. 37-8, Wirz, "Life," and Wirz, *Trial*, p. 804.

⁷ William B. Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology* (New York: Ungar, 1964), pp. 69-113, 256.

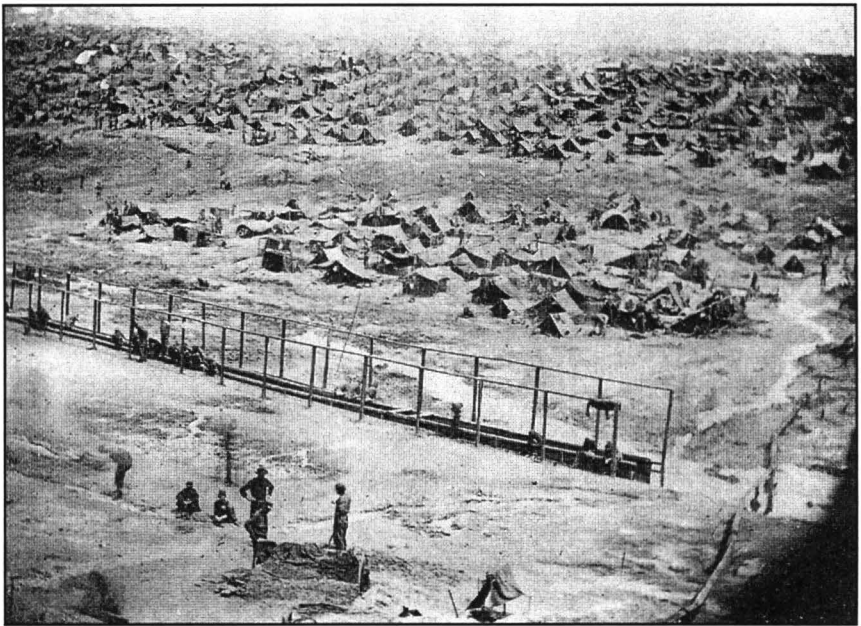
The location of the camp was poorer than originally assumed. Military action in 1864 hampered the procuring of supplies, a problem made worse by Union cavalry raids on Georgia's rail system. Also, the flow of the stream running through the camp slowed by the summer of 1864, making fresh water difficult to get. The compound was designed to hold ten thousand men, and shortages of supplies meant the prisoners were poorly housed. When the first captives arrived on February 27, 1864, only a stockade was in place with walls fifteen feet high, enclosing sixteen and a half acres. There were few grist mills in the area to grind grain, and too few men to drive cattle to the prison, so the food

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supply was inadequate. Four hundred captives were soon arriving daily, taxing the ability of the Confederate authorities to care for them.⁹

The average number of men in the prison was 7,500 in March, and there were 10,000 men in the stockade in April. The numbers increased to 22,291 in June, to 29,030 in July, and to 31,678 at the end of that month. In August, the prison held its greatest number of captives: 33,006. The number of deaths also rose rapidly. 283 prisoners died in March and 576 in April. The number of deaths in May was 708; in June 1,201; and in July 1,817. The late summer months of August (2,993 deaths) and September (2,677 deaths) were the most severe. In October, 1,595 died; November 499; December 165; January (1865) 197; February 147; and March 108. The last recorded deaths were in April, when 28 men died. According to this list, 12,994 (other historians state 12,913 or 12,949) men died at Andersonville from the 41,000 to 45,000 who

⁹ Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons*, 133-5. See also *OR* vol. 6, pp. 965-6, 992-3, 1000, 1043.



Andersonville.

Courtesy: National Archives.

were incarcerated there, and the death rate was 28.9% to 31.6%. The men died from many maladies including exposure, hunger, unsanitary water, scurvy, and poor hygiene.¹⁰

The Confederate congress passed a law on May 12, 1861 mandating that all prisoners of war be given the same rations “in quantity and quality as those furnished enlisted men in the army of the Confederacy.” But the South often could only supply its soldiers with inadequate rations. Jefferson Davis wrote that the reasons for the high death rates in Southern prisons included “insufficient means of transportation,” too few guards due to the lack of manpower in the South, and too few physicians available for prison service.¹¹

The Confederacy faced acute transportation problems late in the war. Many horses and mules were taken to support the army, and the rail system was inadequate to meet the needs placed on it, resulting in food shortages. In 1863, food riots broke out in many cities including Richmond, Mobile, and Atlanta. Confederate soldiers often took desperate measures to get food as John O. Casler wrote, “We would get them [rations] from the [Union] dead. I have been so hungry that I have cut the blood off from crackers and eaten them.”¹² The Confederacy could not feed its people or properly supply its army, and the Union captives suffered as well.

When Wirz arrived at Andersonville on March 25, 1864, he faced severe problems. The administration of Fort Sumter was inefficient, and three independent officers had control of the region outside the compound: General Winder, Col. George Cooper Gibbs, and Lt. Col. Alexander W. Persons. These men bickered with each other, were often absent, and did little to solve the major problems of the camp. Without their aid, Captain Wirz was left to resolve many pressing problems, but he only had command of the stockade, and he could do little about the availability of supplies because he had no authority to requisition them.¹³

¹⁰ Hesseltine, pp. 143, 146, 152; Marvel, p. 238; *Trial*, pp. 629-40; and Robert Scott Davis, *Ghosts and Shadows of Andersonville* (Macon: Mercer, 2006), pp. 30, 72. Hereafter cited as Davis, *Ghosts*.

¹¹ Davis, *Andersonville*, [pp. 2-3, 7].

¹² Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2010), pp. 178-93 and John O. Casler, *Four Years in the Stonewall Brigade* (Girard, Kan.: Appeal, 1906), p. 208.

¹³ Lonnie R. Speer, *Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War*, (Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole, 1997), p. 260; and Davis, *Ghosts*, pp. 28-9.

Yet he worked with intelligence and energy. "Wirz was a constant presence in Camp Sumter, and he worked tirelessly to improve its conditions." The stream that went through the compound had become an "open sewer" used as a latrine by the inmates. Wirz assigned men to shovel the filth from the stream daily, and he established two dams along the creek, the higher dike for drinking water and the lower for bathing. He wrote that the bread issued to the captives was "of such inferior quality, consisting fully of one-sixth of husk, that it is almost unfit for use and increasing dysentery and other bowel complaints" and recommended that the flour be sifted to remove impurities. He built a bake house, so more cooked food would be available, and he got the prisoners to brew a crude beer made from corn mash and molasses to control scurvy. Wirz also asked for more buckets to issue "rice, beans, vinegar, and molasses" to the men.¹⁴

Wirz continued to improve conditions, and he "brought order to the chaos of the camp." The Captain "tried to compile accurate rolls," and he made the distribution of rations more orderly by dividing the men into messes of ninety men each. To deal with problems of overcrowding, Wirz had "the original stockade ... enlarged by ten acres in June."¹⁵ He has received just praise for his efforts. "Until the day of his arrest he was to exert every effort to alleviate the conditions within the camp and to stem the ever-rising death toll." Lt. Col. Persons observed Wirz at Andersonville and stated, "I know he labored indefatigably" to help the prisoners.¹⁶ Wirz likely saved thousands of men who would have otherwise perished, and there was little if anything more he could have done to alleviate the men's suffering.

Wirz was often harsh as he explained, "Anybody who knows anything about military matters knows that one in command of thirty-five thousand men has to be strict." At his trial, Wirz was condemned for

¹⁴ Charles W. Sanders, Jr., *While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: LSU, 2005), p. 212; and *OR* vol. 7, pp. 89, 135-9, and 207. See also Darrett B. Rutman, "The War Crimes and Trial of Henry Wirz," *Civil War History* 6 (June 1960): no. 2, p. 119, and James Madison Page, *A True History of Andersonville Prison: A Defense of Major Henry Wirz* (New York: Neal, 1908), pp. 101-2.

¹⁵ Rutman, "Henry Wirz," p. 119; Davis, *Ghosts*, p. 27; and Bowie in *OR*, vol. 7, pp. 136-7.

¹⁶ Rutman, "Henry Wirz," p. 119; and *Trial*, p. 463.

the nature of the punishment he inflicted on the prisoners. A few men were whipped, more were “bucked and gagged” (tied up), and many were shackled to cannon balls often weighing 32 pounds. Most often men were placed in stocks. By the standards of the war, the punitive measures at Andersonville were not severe, and the Union army often inflicted “brutal punishments” on its own men that left some of them “permanently disabled.”¹⁷ As punishment, many men often faced little more than Wirz’s infamous profanity.

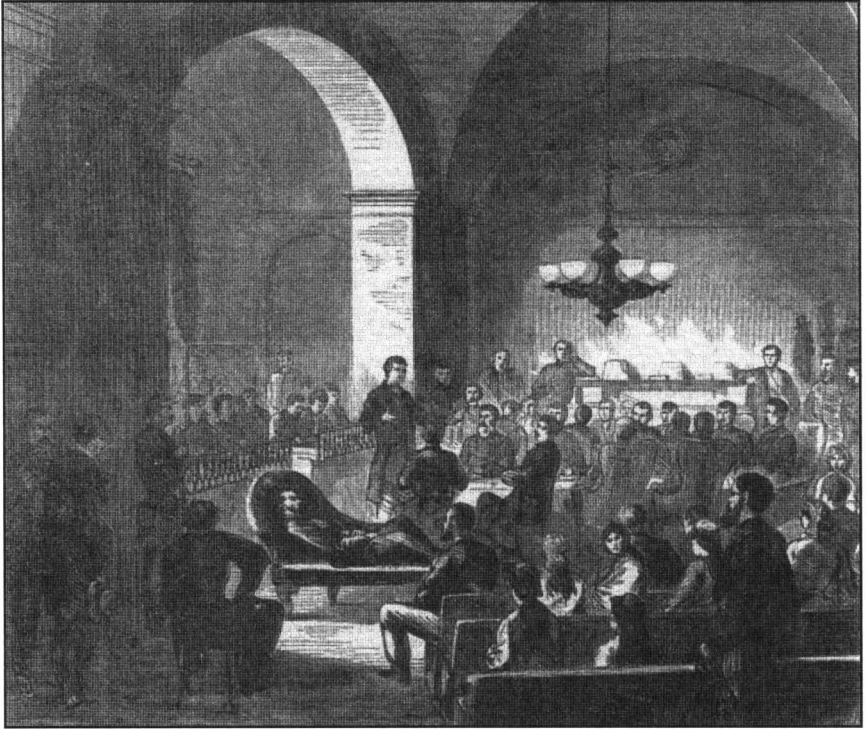
Many Union prisoners accused Wirz of brutality, stating he needlessly caused the men to suffer, but many of these accounts were fabrications. John McElroy, a Union captive, wrote the most influential narrative of the camp. He defamed Wirz stating that he was guilty of many crimes including “cruelly beating and murdering” captives, but recent historians have denounced the memoir as “a prison novel,” which was “preposterously exaggerated.”¹⁸ A few Union prisoners defended Wirz, including James Madison Page, Herman A. Braun, and Edward Wellington Boate. The latter wrote, “Wirz was as kind-hearted a man as I ever met.” At his trial, a number of former prisoners testified in his defense.¹⁹

Three physicians gave testimony at Wirz’s trial and stated that his wounds kept him from committing many of the crimes ascribed to him. Dr. C. M. Ford described Wirz’s right arm, “It is swollen and inflamed, ulcerated in three places; and it has appearance of having been broken. In addition to that, I believe that portions of both bones of the arm are dead.” Ford continued, “I should think him incapable of knocking a man, or lifting a very heavy instrument of any kind, without doing great injury to the arm.” Referring to Wirz’s left arm, Ford said, “There is a very large scar on the left shoulder, and ... the deltoid [shoulder] muscle is entirely gone ... only the front part of the muscle

¹⁷ Wirz, “Life.” For examples see, *Trial*, pp. 46, 117, 177, 209, 214, 218, 318, 321, 507, and 768. Bruce Catton, *A Stillness at Appomattox* (New York: Doubleday, 1953), pp. 32-3.

¹⁸ John McElroy, *Andersonville: a Story of Rebel Military Prisons* (Toledo: Locke, 1879), p. 641. Davis, *Ghosts*, p. 31; and Futch, p. 138.

¹⁹ Page, *A True History*; Herman A. Braun, *Andersonville: An Object Lesson on Protection, a Critical Sketch* (Milwaukee: Fahsel, 1892); and Boate, “The True Story of Andersonville Told by a Federal Prisoner,” *Southern Historical Society Papers* 10 (1882): p. 28.



Trial of Captain Wirz.

Courtesy: *Harper's Weekly*.

of the shoulder remaining.” Ford also testified that Wirz had “dark brown scars” on his legs from scurvy.²⁰ The doctors also noted that Wirz was sick and absent from his post at Andersonville throughout August and most of September 1864 when many of the crimes supposedly took place.

Jefferson Davis blamed the Union for the many deaths of prisoners. “The real cause of all the protracted sufferings of prisoners, North and South, is directly due to the inhuman refusal of the Federal Government to exchange prisoners of war.” The Union could have helped its men and saved many lives by sending aid or exchanging captives, but it refused and blamed the Confederacy. As Hesseltine argued, “Official propaganda was undertaken to convince the North that exchange was impossible—that it had been stopped by the South—and that the southern-

²⁰ *Trial*, pp. 657, 803-5.

ers were actuated by a determination to destroy the lives of the prisoners in their hands.”²¹

General Ulysses S. Grant explained, “It is hard on our men held in Southern prisons not to exchange them, but it is humanity to those left in the ranks to fight our battles. Every man we hold, when released on parole or otherwise, becomes an active soldier against us.”²² Grant’s argument only had merit if the Confederate soldiers were superior to Union troops because prisoner exchange would bring an equal number of men to the federal army.

Grant’s belief that prisoner exchanges helped the South more than the North also overlooked issues including recruiting soldiers and Union morale. Lincoln received many letters begging him to send relief to the prisoners or to exchange them. General William T. Sherman wrote, “I get one hundred letters a day almost asking me to effect the exchange or release of ... Prisoners.”²³ The prisoners expected their government to do everything possible for them, and many soldiers felt betrayed. Some of these men directed their anger at President Lincoln. William Keys wrote in August 1864, “Father Abraham [Lincoln] I wish you had my ration of wood to boil coffee for your family, I think you would soon bring on an exchange.” He added on September 4 in dismay over Lincoln’s refusal to exchange prisoners, “neither experience nor humanity demand or justify our suffering.” Another soldier stated, “If the government don’t get us out they may go to the Devil with Abraham Lincoln.”²⁴

On July 20, 1864, the prisoners at Andersonville wrote a petition to their government requesting their exchange. Wirz released a six-man commission of Union soldiers led by Edward Wellington Boate to carry the petition to the North. Boate recorded, “it distresses me to state *that the representatives of thirty-eight thousand Union prisoners were treated with silent contempt, the President [Lincoln] declining to see*

²¹ Davis, Andersonville, [p. 11] and William B. Hesseltine, “The Propaganda Literature of Confederate Prisons,” *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Feb. 1935): p. 60.

²² *OR*, vol. 7, p. 607.

²³ Hesseltine, p. 226; and William T. Sherman, Aug. 9, 1864, in *Selected Correspondence of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999), p. 685.

²⁴ William Farand Keys “Diary,” Rutgers University Libraries and Marvel, pp. 147-8.

them or have anything to do with them!!!" He added that the policy not to exchange prisoners was the "quintessence of inhumanity, a disgrace to the Administration that carried it out, and a blot upon the country. ... You abandoned your brave men in the hour of their cruelest need. They fought for the Union, and you reached no hand out to save the old faithful, loyal, and devoted servants of the country."²⁵

On January 24, 1864 the Confederate commissioner for prisoner exchange, Robert Ould, proposed that each side send its own doctors to oversee the prisoners held by the enemy and "shall be permitted to take charge of their health and comfort ... with power to receive and distribute such contributions of money, food and clothing and medicines as may be forwarded for the relief of the prisoners."²⁶ This proposal gave the Union the opportunity to care for their own men in Confederate prisons, but the offer was ignored.

General Sherman's Georgia campaign gave the Union an opportunity to aid or release captives in Confederate prisons. He marched virtually unopposed across Georgia in November and December 1864 and into South and North Carolina the following year, but he made no attempt to release or bring aid to the Union prisoners nearby. As Robert S. Davis has observed, "Before the year [1865] ended, the United States government tried Wirz for war crimes and hanged him. General Sherman, more responsible than Wirz for prisoners remaining at Andersonville, however, received a hero's welcome in Washington and a full military review."²⁷

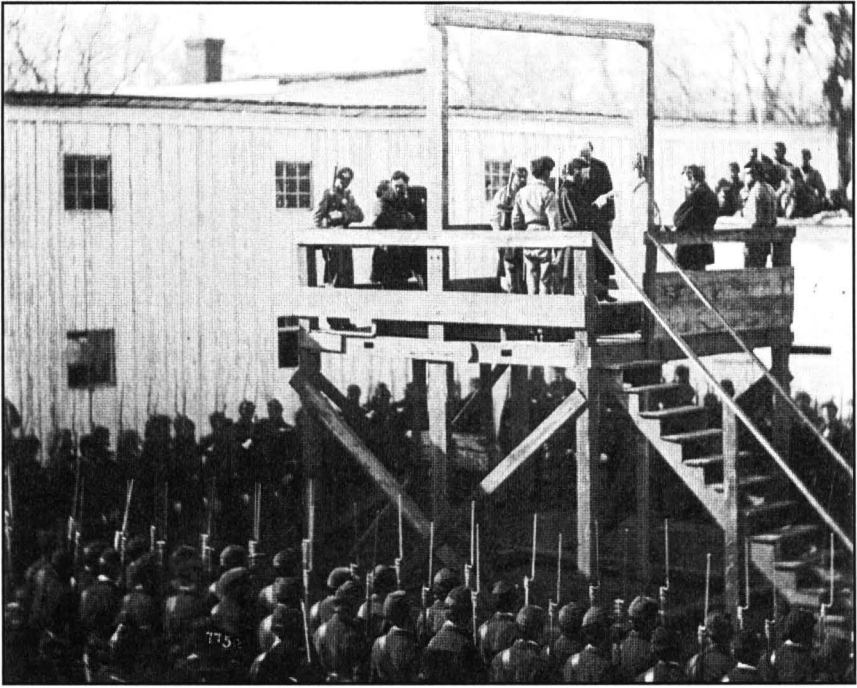
In September 1864, Confederate officials began removing the captives at Andersonville to other locations. In April of 1865, Wirz sent about one thousand men per day to the Union lines, and the camp was abandoned in May. To defray criticism of its refusal to aid and exchange prisoners, the federal government sought someone to blame and punish for the many deaths. As commander of Union prisoners in the South, General Winder was the logical person, but he died in February 1865 and could not be prosecuted.²⁸ But Wirz was accessible, and he was

²⁵ Italics in the original. See Boate, "Andersonville," p. 31; and Marvel, pp. 148-9.

²⁶ *OR*, vol. 6, pp. 871-2.

²⁷ Davis, *Ghosts*, p. 161.

²⁸ Arch Fredric Blakey General John H. Winder (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1990), 201.

*Wirz on the Scaffold*

Courtesy: Library of Congress.

arrested on May 7 and brought to Washington, D.C., where his trial started on August 23, 1865.

The trial was illegal because it was run by a military commission. Civilian courts were still operating meaning military courts were unnecessary. Additionally, Wirz never served in the federal army and was not subject to its justice system. The Constitution also states, "The trial of all crimes ... shall be by Jury; and such Trial shall be held in the State where the said Crimes shall have been committed," meaning it had to be a jury trial and had to take place in Georgia. (Article 3, Sec. 2, para. 3) The Fifth Amendment adds that the trial of a "capital" or "infamous crime" is illegal "unless on a presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury." No such jury met. Additionally, all the Confederate soldiers in Georgia were pardoned under the surrender terms of General Joseph E. Johnston on April 26, 1865 which specified that all military personnel "will be permitted to return to their homes, not to be disturbed by the United States

authorities.”²⁹ These legalities were ignored in the effort to convict Wirz.

The first charge of the indictment stated that Wirz had conspired with Confederate officials to kill Union prisoners, “by subjecting [them] to torture and great suffering, by confining in unhealthy and unwholesome quarters ... by compelling the use of impure water and by furnishing insufficient and unwholesome food.” The court also charged Wirz with personally murdering thirteen Union soldiers, but the names of each alleged victim was “unknown,” some of the supposed crimes took place when Wirz was away from the prison, and one act involved a violent assault which he was physically incapable of administering.³⁰ Wirz was so ill during his trial that he had to be carried into court, and he was unable to sit up during the proceedings.

The prosecution, headed by Norton P. Chipman, used the large financial and legal resources of the federal government to prosecute the case, and 148 witnesses testified over 63 days. Some Union soldiers who testified at the trial perjured themselves and gave unreliable and exaggerated testimony, and the trial record “runs heavy with some of the most absurd hearsay that any American judge ever permitted to stand.”³¹

The defense requested many witnesses who were not allowed to testify, and Robert Ould, who came to give evidence on prisoner exchange, was ordered to leave the city or face arrest. No testimony was allowed that questioned the policies of the Union, reflected poorly on President Lincoln, or criticized the North for not exchanging prisoners. Most of the testimony centered on the conditions of the camp, implying that Wirz caused the captives to suffer needlessly, but the court was unsuccessful in proving its main accusations. “His trial failed to produce any credible account of his acting with personal cruelty or evidence of his role in any conspiracy.”³² In his diary, Wirz expressed dismay on how witnesses for the defense were discredited. “What a mockery this trial is, they say they are anxious that I should have justice done to me, and then when a witness is put on the stand to give testimony they try

²⁹ Mark E. Neely, Jr. *The Fate of Liberty: Abraham Lincoln and Civil Liberties* (New York: Oxford, 1991), p. 161; and *Trial*, pp. 9-10.

³⁰ *Trial*, pp. 3-8.

³¹ Marvel, [p. ix]-x.

³² Davis, *Ghosts*, p. 183.

everything to break him down, if they cannot do it they try to assail his private character.”³³

Recent historians have condemned the trial. William Marvels stated that “Wirz was a dead man from the start.” Ovid L. Futch wrote that the trial was a “legal lynching of Wirz.” Robert Scott Davis asserted that the trial was “only a formality for a defendant facing the gallows at the hands of a prejudiced court.” Charles W. Sanders claimed “that the entire proceeding was a sham—and a poorly executed sham at that.” The lawyer, Glen W. LaForce, agreed stating that “the trial of Henry Wirz was worse than a mistake, worse even than a miscarriage of justice. The trial of ... Wirz was a national disgrace. Vengeance, not justice, had been served.”³⁴

The prosecution tried to implicate many leaders of the Confederacy in a conspiracy to murder prisoners by listing Jefferson Davis and other leaders of the Confederacy as coconspirators. The court also condemned “others whose names are unknown, [who] maliciously and traitorously ... destroy[ed] the lives of a large number of Federal prisoners.”³⁵ No record of such a conspiracy has ever been uncovered, and it was a false accusation created by the prosecution. The trial ended on October 24. Wirz was found guilty and sentenced to hang.

Government agents came to see the condemned man in jail the night before the execution and offered him a pardon to implicate Jefferson Davis in the crimes at Andersonville. Wirz rejected this bribe with contempt as he told a companion. “These men have just offered me my liberty if I will testify against Mr. Davis, and incriminate him with the charges against the Andersonville Prison. I told them that I could not do this, as I neither knew Mr. Davis personally, officially or socially, but if they expected with the offer of my miserable life to purchase me to treason and treachery to the South they had undervalued me.”³⁶

³³ Wirz “Diary,” Oct. 4, 1865, in *New York Times*, Nov. 15, 1865.

³⁴ Marvel, p. 243; Futch, p. 120; Davis, *Ghosts*, p. 197; Sanders, *While in the Hands*, p. 295; and Glen W. LaForce, “The Trial of Major Henry Wirz: a National Disgrace,” *The Army Lawyer* (June 1988), p. 10.

³⁵ *Trial*, p. 807.

³⁶ Quoted by Richard Winder in James J. Williamson, *Prison Life in the Old Capitol and Reminiscences of the Civil War* (West Orange, N.J.: np., 1911), p. 139. See also, C. B. Winder and F. E. Boyle in *The Death and Trial of Henry Wirz* (Raleigh: Uzzell, 1908), pp. 44-5.

On the day of his execution, November 10, 1865, Wirz was concerned about his wife and children, and he sent a letter pleading that they be helped financially. Henry Wirz was taken to the place of execution, and a long list of accusations were read to him as he stood on the scaffold. When asked if he had any last words, Wirz replied, "No sir; only that I am innocent, and will die like a man, my hopes being in the future. I go before my God, the Almighty God, and he will judge between me and you." Wirz fell when the trap door was released, but the rope failed to break his neck, and he writhed in agony for twenty minutes before he strangled to death.³⁷ At least, federal revenge ended at that point, and there were no more executions for war crimes.

The tragedy of Andersonville still discredits the nation, and many men in the Union and Confederacy must share the blame for the high death rates in that prison, but Wirz was unfairly singled out for punishment. Henry Wirz was a flawed man who did his best to alleviate suffering and save lives at Andersonville, and he is no stain on the honor of Swiss Americans.

- *Albert Winkler, Brigham Young University*

³⁷ "The Execution of Wirz," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, Nov. 11, 1865.