

The Hessians

*Mercenaries from Hessen-Kassel in the
American Revolution*



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Introduction

The hiring of auxiliary troops by great powers in the eighteenth century marks a transitional stage in the history of western warfare, from the feudal levy to the modern conscript army. Auxiliary contingents then served in the armies of all great powers (except Russia) in the wars of that century. International jurists of the time, attempting to draw limits to destructive warfare by applying Natural Law to human affairs, recognized the practice of one prince sending aid to another at war, in the form of troops, in exchange for moneys called subsidies. They distinguished between such troops, called auxiliaries (*Hilfsstruppen*), and mercenaries, who were individuals who enlisted in foreign military service in return for a certain sum of money and certain conditions, such as a limit on the length of their service.

The study of the Hessen-Kassel corps enables us to see one of these auxiliary contingents in detail: its personnel, training, discipline, recruiting practices, organization, and the difficulty of its working as part of a foreign (British) army composed of men speaking a different language and with different political traditions.

Both the Hessian corps and the British army included within their ranks mercenaries, i.e. foreigners who had enlisted for pay, but properly neither of them could be called mercenary.¹

The Hessians are particularly interesting, not merely because their princes were the most successful, and later infamous, at hiring out auxiliaries; but also because they confronted in America a new society and new ideals of liberalism and patriotism which were to make the hiring of troops for pay anachronistic. The Hessian corps – indeed, all six German corps hired out to the British in that war, all collectively and incorrectly known as the ‘Hessians’ – are the best-known case of such an auxiliary contingent. Nearly every American schoolboy learns of Washington’s defeat of the Hessians

¹ By common usage, however, the Hessians have been called mercenaries. In this work I refer to them as both auxiliaries and mercenaries.

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at Trenton. It is doubtful if anyone save the specialist knows of Duke Karl Eugen's Württemberg contingent at Leuthen or the Brunswickers who served Venice against the Turks in the 1660s. This is not because the hiring of the Hessians was in any way exceptional for the time, but is due to the subsequent importance of the United States in world affairs and its role as an ideal for European liberals. The era of the American and French Revolutions marked a profound transformation of European public opinion. Subsequently, every aspect of the Hessians – the morality of the subsidy treaties, recruiting, desertion rates, their performance in war, their princes' private lives – became a subject of historical, and indeed political, debate in Germany.²

German historians of the last century, whether Prussian nationalists like Heinrich von Treitschke (a Saxon who transferred his xenophobic Germanism to Prussia) or liberal nationalists like Friedrich Kapp, had nothing but contempt for any German state north of Austria, save Prussia. In the eyes of these historians princes like Friedrich II of Hessen-Kassel were condemned because they were neither liberals nor nationalists. Yet both of these policies would create a national unified Germany; the princes could scarcely be expected to commit political suicide by preparing for their extinction.

The views of these German historians were uncritically adopted by their British and American counterparts like Sir George Otto Trevelyan and G.P. Gooch, while Bancroft was a friend of Kapp, who stayed in New York during political exile. To these historians the princes' crime was not merely to have trafficked in the blood of their subjects, but also to have opposed the realization of the liberal democratic state, the highest form of human government.

Study of the little German states has more recently shown that the ideals of benevolent rule carried out on a large scale by enlightened despots in Austria, Prussia, and Russia were also brought to fruition in legislation in the little principalities. American military historians writing of the revolution and the Hessians' participation remain ignorant of these developments. Friedrich of Hessen-Kassel established the first Foundling Hospital in Germany and the first museum on the continent open to the public, yet all we know of him from the standard histories is that he had one hundred bastards: a fact of dubious authenticity, in

² For the use made of the 'Hessians' by various interested parties, see H. D. Schmidt, 'The Hessian Mercenaries, the career of a political cliché', *History*, XLIII (1958), pp. 207–12.

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contemporary sources attributable only to the gossipy Wraxall. Friedrich was supposedly motivated only by sordid lust, his family life non-existent. Yet in February 1783, the hour of Britain's and Hessen's defeat, it was not of his troops or of subsidy arrears that Friedrich wrote to George III, but of being reunited with his sons:

Knowing well how much [Your Majesty] interests himself in my affairs, I take the liberty of informing [you] of a domestic event of which no one could appreciate better the happiness to be enjoyed than a Monarch who knows so well what it is to be a father. My love for my sons, conspiring with the sentiments which they carry for me, has caused me to traverse the barrier which was to be found raised between us since their childhood, and at this moment I have the comfort of having all three with me.³

George Forster, present at the announcement of the happy event, wrote, 'So many cried for joy, that all the soldiers under arms on the drill square were in tears, as the Landgraf proclaimed his eldest son General of all the Hessian troops. He himself cried at length, and so did all the princes.'⁴

Of this Kapp and Treitschke take no cognizance. Complementary to their contempt for Friedrich of Hessen is admiration for Frederick the Great of Prussia as (of course) a precursor of German national greatness. Frederick supposedly despised the Hessians, thought Washington a great general, and took a keen interest in America's independence. A careful reading of Frederick's *Political Correspondence*, rather than what he wrote for Voltaire's consumption, shows the fallacy of these views. Yet Edward J. Lowell, the only English-speaking historian to write a book on the Hessians, appropriated Kapp's viewpoint.

Aside from histories animated by the partisanship of German nationalism, publications on the Hessians fall into three categories. First are the articles of dilettante like the *Zolldirektor* August Woringner of Kassel, Major General von Eisentraut, Pastor Junghans, and Otto Gerland in *Hessenland* and other periodicals, unknown to American military historians of the revolution. Often they had access to documents no longer available to us, sometimes belonging to their families; thus, although they are ignorant of American history, their work is still valuable.

Second are the strictly military German works, such as regimental histories. These too are unknown to Americans, with one

³ SP81/196, Friedrich of Hessen to George III, 15 February 1783.

⁴ Johann George Forster, *Briefwechsel*, I (Leipzig, 1829), p. 320.

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exception: Max von Eelking's book on the auxiliaries, translated into English by J. G. Rosengarten, a German-American born in Kassel. Eelking's work is typical of others in this category: meticulous research in German documents, with a soldier's keen eye brought to bear on battles and skirmishes, but a very uncritical use of these sources and only trifling knowledge of American ones such as Sparks' edition of Washington's letters.

Third are the published journals and extracts of letters, such as those which appeared in Professor Schlözer's contemporary *Briefwechsel* at Gottingen. Those in English are better known to Americans, but one of the best, Bardeleben's, written by an intelligent subaltern in the 1776 campaign, is never mentioned. Yet the original is in America.

The best known of these published journals are the two volumes edited by Professor Uhlendorf, using the von Jungkenn papers at Ann Arbor, Michigan. Yet even Uhlendorf, with his meticulous scholarship, relied on Kapp for his account of the subsidy treaties in his introduction to the Baurmeister letters. The counterblast against Kapp, by Philip Losch, is unknown in America. For American historians, the time-worn books of Eelking (in Rosengarten's translation), Kapp and Lowell remain the only works on the German troops. Recently however a very good book has appeared on the Ansbach-Bayreuth troops, by Erhard Städtler, and two on the Hessians, one in English, by Ernst Kipping.

More important than the published material are the manuscript collections. First of these is that in Marburg, covering not only the Hessian military effort in all aspects, but also the organization of Hessen-Kassel as a state supporting an auxiliary corps. Journals in the *Murhardsche Bibliothek* in Kassel supplement the Marburg material.

Other German archives contain valuable material. Hannover has the reports of Electoral officers on the Hessian troop movements and also the important journal of Friedrich von Münchhausen, whose comments upon Sir William Howe's *Narrative* throw much light on the battles of Trenton and Redbank. Münchhausen's journal has been published in an English translation by Ernst Kipping with notes by Sam Smith, but they have omitted his commentary on Howe's *Narrative*, the most interesting part. Wolfenbüttel has the letters of Hessian officers to another auxiliary general, Riedesel, who with his wife is the subject of several biographies. Bamberg has letters of Ansbach-Bayreuth officers on the war.

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Journals of Hessian soldiers are relatively few (unlike those of their officers), and that of Grenadier Johannes Reuber, bits of which appear in translation in some books, is extremely valuable. A copy sold at Sotheby's for over £3,000 to a New York bookshop recently. With the help of Dr Joachim Fischer I was able to use a 'copy' in Frankfurt.⁵

With the exception of the von Jungkenn papers, Bardeleben's journal, and some letters of Captains Friedrich von Stamford and Johann Ewald to the Misses Van Horne of Boundbrook, New Jersey, the various German journals held in American archives are copies made by Bancroft and others, from originals in Germany.

The Colonial Office papers in the Public Record Office include reports of British officers who mustered the Hessian troops. The Hessian claim for 'extraordinaries' in the Audit Office and Treasury papers contains valuable information. Reports of British representatives in Germany, in the State Papers, throw light on negotiations, troop movements in Germany, and the soldier business in general.

In the British Museum, the letters of Frederick Haldimand, a Swiss in the British army in Canada, tell us about the Germans who served under him.

A reference in Ira. D. Gruber's book on the Howe brothers led me to two documents in the Bedford Record Office. The journal of Admiral Sir George Collier in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich throws amusing light upon the character of General von Heister, the first Hessian commander.

Another reference, in Horst Dippel's excellent dissertation on German political opinion and the revolution, led me to obtain a photostat copy of Simon Louis du Ry's letter from the *Burgerbibliothek* in Bern, purportedly proving vast Hessian desertion (it doesn't).

So many British and American journals and collections of letters have been published describing the war and throwing credit or discredit onto the Hessians, that I can only mention the main ones here: on the American side, Washington's correspondence, Force's *American Archives*, Commager and Morris's *Spirit of 'Seventy-Six*,

⁵ Reuber's original is in Kassel. To anyone unacquainted with Kasseler dialect it is almost impossible to read. Reuber, an intelligent but only partly educated private soldier, rendered phonetically into German any foreign words he heard: thus for the English 'man o' war' he wrote *Manuahr*. Reuber made two copies of the original himself for his sons. One of these is in Frankfurt, the other is presumably that sold at Sotheby's. There is also a copy by Bancroft in the New York Public Library.

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Heath's *Memoirs*, and Frank Moore's collection of contemporary newspaper articles; on the British, the journals of Frederick Mackenzie, Archibald Robertson, and Ambrose Serle, and the letters of Sir Henry Clinton, Lord Rawdon, and Lieutenant Hale of the 45th have been especially valuable.⁶

I have attempted throughout to describe events as the Hessians saw and described them, without, I hope, being uncritical of their errors and misconceptions. I believe my study of the Hessians is the first to bring together the material in such a variety of sources, particularly British and German. A balanced view of the Hessians has too long been frustrated on the one hand by the emotional issues, first of German nationalism, and then of 'blood money' and 'trade in human beings', and on the other simply by ignorance of German conditions and source material. Even the British officer who mustered and inspected the Hessian auxiliaries in America thought, mistakenly, that Britain was to pay the Hessian Landgraf £5 for every dead man and a proportion for the wounded and disabled.⁷ An American historian put this misconception into the language of the consumer public: 'every time an American bullet went home, the prince's cash register rang up a sale'.⁸ The hiring of troops was simply a stage in the development of western armies originating at a time when the concept of the Rights of Man was unknown. It was in the American Revolution that the practice first came under attack, from partisans of American liberty.

⁶ For these works and others, the reader is referred to the bibliography (for Hale's letters, see under W. H. Wilkin).

⁷ HMC: *Report on American MSS. in the Royal Institution of Great Britain* (4 vols. London and Dublin, 1904-9), I, p. 100, Sir George Osborne to Capt. Mackenzie, 30 March 1777.

⁸ John C. Miller, *Triumph of Freedom 1775-1783* (Boston, 1948), pp. 12-13.