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The Hessian ‘Invasion’ of the Newly Anointed United States

By: Matthew Fritz

The American Revolution was not a bipolar war; the belligerents were not inclusive to Great Britain and its American colonies. The war saw the bringing in of France, Germany, Spain, and the Native Americans to the theater. Even though Germany was not unified at the time of the conflict, a certain area loaned out its troops to back Great Britain’s claims. These German soldiers were called Hessians, meaning they hailed from the Hesse-Cassel state. This group of German fighting men were well disciplined and well-trained. The British were aware of their successes and prowess; however, this reason alone was not the only contributor in Hesse-Cassel’s loaning out of soldiers to Great Britain. The connection of Germanic and English cultures had its roots in the Saxon invaders of the large island, now modern day Great Britain. The Saxons were Germanic in root, which explained the close connection in language between the British and Germans. It was not a surprise that Hesse-Cassel came to Britain’s aid during the American Revolution. These Hessian soldiers were disciplined; however, many were enticed by the offers in the United States after the defeat of Great Britain to immigrate. The German mercenaries that stayed were deserters and captured prisoners of war. The Hessians were motivated to stay in the newly formed United States as a result of the new life that was able to be fostered in the rich and bountiful lands that made up the previous colonies.

The Hessians were bright soldiers with discipline and talent and were vital in bolstering the British ranks. These mercenaries were viewed with discontent by the colonists at the time. Leading intellect and colonial figure Benjamin Franklin held a large disdain for the German soldiers and more so their leaders and princes. In a letter sent to a Mr. John Winthrop of Boston, Franklin voiced his feelings toward the German soldiers being brought in to fight on the side of
Great Britain. Franklin commented, “[T]he Conduct of those Princes of Germany who have sold the Blood of their People, has subjected them to contempt and Odium of all Europe.”¹ Franklin talked the Hessians down as being inferior, in large part to the German prince’s siding with Great Britain in the fight against the American colonies. Franklin further commented on the disorderly behavior of the German prince of Anspach, a supplier of German Hessians, when he claimed, “[T]he Prince of Anspach, whose Recruits mutinied and refus’d to march, was oblig’d to disarm and fetter them.”² Franklin was biased in the matter and neglected some of the ability the Hessians had in and out of battle. The Hessians were competent soldiers, and Franklin pushed past the fact that they may have been an effective tool if turned around on the British. Franklin published satires on the Hessians and sent one with the letter to John Winthrop.³ He reflected the sentiments held toward the Hessians at the time; they were seen as servants of the British oppression. This feeling played a role in the way they were judged. In due time, though, the Hessians that stayed as immigrants were eventually able to blend in and shed the negative connotation associated with the United States Revolution.

The Hessian spirit was mocked for a time; however, Joseph G. Rosengarten published an important article about the Hessians, calling for their praise. In “A Defence of the Hessians,” Rosengarten called to the positives of the German mercenaries in the Revolution.⁴ He was vehement about protecting the Hessian’s honor. His piece also acted as a resource to understand the fighting style and make-up of the Hessian war mentality. It weighed on the other side of Franklin’s argument heavily and opposed his negative accusations established in his satires.

Rosengarten started by explaining the close relationship the British and German people shared in

² Ibid., 9
³ Ibid., 9
⁴ Revolution will refer to the American Revolution, otherwise any other revolution will be labeled appropriately.
aiding to set up why the leader of Hesse-Cassel was apt to send Britain troops. Rosengarten explained, “[I]n the Seven Years’ War, England joined Frederick the Great, so, too, did the Hessians and the other German allies.” The long term ties of heritage were already knitted from centuries before; however, this renewed comradery during the Seven Years’ War established another bond between the Germans and the British. The Hessians were desirable as soldiers because they were well-trained and efficient at their jobs. Rosengarten suggested that “[T]he ancient glory of Hesse during the Thirty Years’ War was so great that Gustavus Adolphus…asked for a Hessian, Colonel Falkenburg, as military governor of Magdeburg.” The Hessians were respected and able to fight effectively through a tradition started in the fire of war in the seventeenth century Europe. The connection between the British and Germans also strengthened the ties between the two countries as allies. The Hessian expertise and the genealogical connections explained the British reasoning for wanting Hessian soldiers as a force in retaking their rebelling colonies.

The Hessians performed well in the British colonies. They were well organized and used their stunning tactics to great advantage on the battlefield. The implication of Hessian soldiers allowed for British success at the fighting on Manhattan Island in the early years of the Revolution. Bruce Bliven developed accounts of Hessian fighting ability in the Revolution. Bliven claimed, “[I]n an advance…the jaegers, in exception to the general close-order style of march, moved ahead of the grenadiers in an open, irregular fashion, running from point to point and ducking behind trees and boulders.” The jaegers acted as the Hessian elite soldiers and some “had been professional hunters or game wardens in Germany, carried rifles instead of

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6 Ibid., 157
smooth-bore muskets…and were consequently regarded, with some justification, as sharpshooters.”

In a Hessian soldier’s journal from September Twenty-Eighth, 1778, he claimed, “the Second Battalion [of the Jaeger Corps] had butchered the light infantry of the Lady Washington Regiment, so that only three soldiers in the entire regiment escaped.” The Hessians were regarded for their ways of fighting. This ability to fight was due to Hessian upbringing, being described by scholar Rodney Atwood as “fitted… to endure the rigours of military service. A young German traveler noted in the 1780s that the men were stout and strongly built, and matched the country, which was rough and wild.”

The Hessians were not to be trifled with; they were effective in upholding the quality ensured by their tradition and training. It becomes confusing then the reason why some Hessians decided to stay in the United States after the Revolution.

The Hessians were well trained and loyal: however, this assertion was not always true, since there were cases of desertion. These Hessians became immigrants if they were able to escape the hangman. Ernst Kipping’s, The Hessian View of America, established that “[T]he persistent American propaganda, the defiant attitude of the American citizens…and… large Hessian casualties… are perhaps the reasons why so few Hessian officers deserted.”

The Hessian desertions were not anything substantial; however, they were important because this action defined the first Hessian immigrants to the newly founded United States. Rosengarten also presented the resistance to abandonment the Hessian soldiers had during their war time actions in the United States. Rosengarten claimed, “In May, 1782…there were complaints of the poor quality of the recruits… [T]hese new recruits were worn-out old soldiers and mere tramps,

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8 Ibid., 42
11 Ernst Kipping, The Hessian View of America (Monmouth Beach, New Jersey, 1971), 33.
tempted by…high wages promised by Pennsylvania farmers.”¹² Even though a lot of these recruits were not from the old stock Hessians by Rosengarten’s definition, they were still soldiers fighting under the banner of Hesse-Cassel. Rosengarten uncovered the lure of farmlands as pleasing to the Hessians. The German soldier was able to sign up for service, and once over in North America, desert and start a new life. In *A Generous and Merciful Enemy*, Professor David Krebs established, “[A]lthough American revolutionaries were fully convinced of the irresistible attractiveness of their land and ideas, desertion was a difficult decision for the German soldiers and prisoners.”¹³ This decision often involved life or death. The evidence of such a consequence was captured in a journal of a Jaeger Officer in New York from September Twenty-Third, 1778. The officer declared that “Jaeger Reckhagel was hanged today because he was caught when he attempted to desert.”¹⁴ The Hessians were soldiers forged in discipline, discipline that dictated desertion as punishable by death. However, this was not enough to stop other Hessians from seeking out the land in Pennsylvania and other areas. Even though desertion was rare compared to the later Hessian immigrants, it still was an example of how the German soldiers spread themselves into the fabric of revolutionary America.

The bulk of Hessian migration was a result of many Hessians being taken prisoner during the Revolution. The effect was a large labor force of German prisoners of war that worked in places in Pennsylvania. The Hessians were enticed with what they found. This caused the conversion of German soldiers to United States citizens. A large number of prisoners came from the run in of Washington’s men with Hessian soldiers at Trenton. Scholar and historian Hugh Rankin accounted the Hessian capture and surprise during the Battle of Trenton in his work, *The

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American Revolution. Rankin used the journal of George Washington’s advisor, Lieutenant Colonel John Fitzgerald, who was present at the Battle of Trenton. In his entry on December Twenty-Second, 1776, Fitzgerald confirmed that there were Hessians stationed at Trenton. He wrote, “I rode along the river yesterday morning and could see the Hessians in Trenton… Rall has his own regiment and Knyphausen a few dragoons… [T]he Hessians call them Yagers [jaegers].” Fitzgerald continued on December Twenty-Sixth that “[W]e [the American soldiers] have taken nearly 1,000 prisoners… [A]bout forty Hessians were killed or wounded.” Fitzgerald claimed that the success was due to Washington’s cunning and in the same journal entry asserted, “Washington has baffled the enemy… [H]e has pounced on the Hessians like an eagle upon a hen.” The Hessians were being captured, with a large amount of them coming from Trenton in late 1776. The German soldiers were stranded under the rebels; rebels they typically viewed as backwards and lacking discipline.

The question of what to do with the prisoners became prevalent. There was a large number of Germans that were under the United States’ care. The United States decided to employ the Hessians as workers in towns. Historian and scholar Ken Miller wrote Dangerous Guests, which featured the Hessian prisoners that had to adapt to the surrounding area at the onset of their incarceration. Miller claimed the German soldiers “labored in war-related industries or on flourishing farms dotting the Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia countryside.” The labor went to various areas to be productive members of the emerging United States’ society. There was a system of ways to pay the Hessian laborers. Writer Clifford N. Smith established in his work, Hessian Laborers at Lancaster, Pennsylvania that “there is a

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16 Ibid., 109.
17 Ibid., 109.
payroll, dated 19 April 1777, for Hessian laborers working on public buildings.”²⁹ Smith claimed that these Germans on the payroll were most likely German mercenaries and that “the term ‘Hessian’ was used at the time to denote all German mercenaries.”²⁰ Smith further claimed that “between twenty and forty percent of the German mercenaries, particularly the prisoners of war, remained in America after the termination of hostilities.”²¹ There was a motivation for the German soldiers to stay in the United States. Pennsylvania was already home to a large German immigrant network, an enticing pull for the German prisoners working there. Newspaper writer, Jim Kinter claimed, “[B]ut, having worked out their mutual problems [Americans and Hessian prisoners]…[T]he Pennsylvania Dutch simply couldn’t bear to have all that manpower…going to waste…and the language barrier was minimal.”²² The Hessians were pulled in to areas where there was little language block and there were lands to be profited from. Kinter also mentioned the Hessian resistance to returning to Germany because of the farms and American women who functioned well as wives.²³ Like all immigrants, the Hessians were motivated by opportunity, which was what a lot of them found through these work programs. An interesting tension emerged between the older Pennsylvanian Germans and the Hessians. Miller claimed, “[E]ven the relations between the captive auxiliaries and local German speakers showed strains of older regional divisions newly exacerbated by war.”²⁴ Tension from Germany boiled over to the United States; however, Miller still asserted, “[B]y 1778, however, many of the interior’s German speakers were giving their newly captured German prisoners a more enthusiastic

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²⁰ Ibid., 188.
²¹ Ibid., 188.
²² Jim Kinter, “Lancaster Was Host To 1200 Hessians,” Der Wunnerfitz.
²³ Ibid.
²⁴ Ken Miller, Dangerous Guests (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 166.
The Germans were welcomed to the United States, especially in predominately German areas of Pennsylvania. The Hessians’ capture allowed for them to be exposed to the American side of the Revolution, and it was tempting to take a wife and land. The Hessians were living the American dream. In the article, “When Lancaster was a Hessian Prison,” Jon Rutter analyzed the Hessians prisoners that came to Lancaster. Rutter wrote, “the Hessian narrative shows prisoners and captors learning to coexist amicably as the Revolution pops around them.” Rutter also suggested that the Hessian soldiers were not typically disloyal and “rarely broke parole.” The Hessians that became prisoners as a result of Trenton, and other resulting skirmishes, allowed for them to be exposed to a vast array of opportunities. Kinter brought up the Hessian officers’ reasoning for why their soldiers that were taken from Trenton were not being professional, therefore easily misled. This mindset also was seen with the reasoning for desertions. After the war was over, many stayed as permanent residents of the United States, assimilating in to American society. The Hessians were fortunate to be imprisoned in areas that already had German cultures infused in the local societies. Lancaster especially was an enticing area, with great land and a plethora of native German speaking citizens that was a welcome to the displaced German mercenaries.

The Hessians left a legacy behind. Their German blood still runs through generations of American-Germanic families. Kinter presented the numbers of prisoners in Lancaster County’s townships. There totaled a number of thirty one probable Hessian prisoners that staked up in Lancaster County. Kinter also claimed there “were those [Hessians] who, at the end of the war,

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25 Ibid., 167
27 Ibid.
28 Jim Kinter, “Lancaster Was Host To 1200 Hessians,” Der Wunnerfitz.
29 Many Hessian officers claimed it was the weak recruit base in Germany that produced subpar soldiers, ones not worthy of the Hessian tradition. Seen Rosengarten’s “Defence of Hessians” page 181 on Seume for more.
30 Jim Kinter, “Lancaster Was Host To 1200 Hessians,” Der Wunnerfitz.
owned their own farms or had married American girls, or both.”31 The Hessian immigrants set up lives for themselves and for their later generations to come. Marriage acted as the way to continue the legacy, while the farms were able to be passed down through families. Rutter asserted that it was common for prisoners to assimilate into the new American society, since “[M]any other former prisoners married into the community, where their descendants still live.”32 The Hessians became a large part of the post-revolution immigration to the United States. The German born soldiers forged a life in the United States, and it is still evident in areas of Pennsylvania to this day.

The Hessians saw what the United States had to offer as far as opportunity went; they wanted to embrace the ability to start a new life and a family. The Hessians came in through desertions and prisoner programs, where they were exposed to the other side of the Revolution. Places like Lancaster were even more enticing because of the already existing German culture that made assimilation easier. The Hessians were able to carry on their German language, while also adapting to the newly freed United States. This use of what Horace Kallen called cultural pluralism was evident in the legacies these Germans left behind. The fires of war spat out the Hessians as children of the United States. These soldiers were well-respected for their prowess on the battlefield, and even though most Hessians returned back to Germany, many stayed to call the United States home.

31 Ibid.
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