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Contributors Not Mercenaries: The Accomplishments of the Hessians



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Abstract

¹ Carl, J.H., "Drittes Regiment Garde" (1784). Prints, Drawings and Watercolors from the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection. Brown Digital Repository. Brown University Library.

Many historians once considered the Hessians to be mercenaries who fought only for pay, but their own writings reveal a more complex story. Therefore, this paper argues that Hessians should be seen as contributors to the new American society rather than as brutal outsiders. By using source criticism, comparative history, and group history, this study examines their civilian activities in science, religion, and community life between 1775 and 1783. This paper presents five primary sources: the writings of Johann David Schoepf, Johann Conrad Dohla, and Johann von Ewald; the diary of Lutheran chaplains Wagner and Philip Waldeck; and the memoirs of Baroness Frederika Charlotte Riedesel. These sources trace how Hessians observed nature, recorded local customs, maintained order, and participated in religious and family life. Together, these sources reveal curiosity, craftsmanship, and empathy that contradict the stereotype of Hessians as mercenaries. These findings provide evidence that Hessians should be regarded as contributors to early American communities rather than as mere hired soldiers.

Contributors Not Mercenaries: The Accomplishments of the Hessians

From the beginning of the Revolutionary War, British Officials and pamphleteers portrayed the Hessians as frightening foreign mercenaries sent to terrify rebellious colonists. Pamphlets and cartoons described them as towering foreign soldiers with strange helmets and inhuman discipline, a force meant to frighten Americans into obedience. This image, repeated by American revolutionaries and later generations, reduces thousands of In reality, Hessian writings reveal a different story. Their observations of science and nature, their participation in religious life, their interactions with American society, and their reflections on daily community life demonstrate curiosity, discipline, and social engagement rather than brutality. This paper argues that the traditional image of the Hessian as a ruthless hireling is incomplete. By reexamining their own accounts, this study shows that Hessians made meaningful contributions to early American communities and should be understood as historical actors rather than symbols of fear.

From Hesse-Kassel and Hesse-Hanau: Background and Methodology:

Before the Holy Roman Empire was established, the Germanic states were in a state of chaos and poverty. The situation did not improve after the Empire was established; instead, it got worse. The French Empire frequently invaded the western part of the empire. The empire's states were in chaos and even greater poverty. In the Late 18th century, British imperial mobilization often relied on state-to-state military treaties with German states to supplement the regular army's manpower shortage. These German soldiers came from Hesse-Kassel and Hesse-Hanau, principalities of the Holy Roman Empire. From 1776 to 1783, there were approximately thirty thousand German soldiers in North America. They not only participated in large-scale battles but also communicated and set connections with local Americans. As the war progressed, some

soldiers gradually went deeper into the fields they were familiar with. Although American public memory has long portrayed Hessians as mercenaries, this stereotypical narrative obscures the connections between soldiers and local people.

At the same time, British officers described the German auxiliaries as fearsome, unstoppable warriors to intimidate colonial resistance, emphasizing their towering mitre helmets, bright colors, and disciplined formations. Publicity exaggerated their physical strength and portrayed them as brutal foreigners. Meanwhile, American revolutionaries used this same imagery to condemn Britain for employing violent outsiders.

Methodologically, this paper analyzes five Hessian primary sources using close textual reading and thematic grouping. The journals of Johann David Schoepf, Johann Conrad Dohla, and Johann von Ewald, the religious writings of Wagner, and the letters of Baroness Riedesel are examined not only for the information they record but also for the perspectives, education, social positions, and potential biases of their authors. Rather than treating these men and women as isolated individuals, this study adopts a group-history approach, examining the Hessians as a social and cultural community within the British Army. Special attention is paid to how their writings reveal patterns of scientific observation, religious participation, community interaction, and responses to the American environment.

This method emphasizes how Hessians described daily life, interpreted American society, and how their writings both challenged and confirmed the public image created by British and American publicity. By focusing on recurring themes across multiple sources, the methodology highlights cultural actions and intellectual interests that shaped Hessian identity.

Through this approach, the paper evaluates the reliability and purpose of each source, compares perspectives across authors, and situates their writings within the broader German and

American contexts of the late eighteenth century. This allows the study to move beyond the traditional mercenary stereotype and instead interpret Hessian sources as evidence of lived experience and community engagement.

From Neglect to Recognition: Historians' Views of the Hessians:

Before the 1900s, early Studies and sources considered the Hessians chiefly as “Mercenaries.” Later work reframed and examined it within eighteenth-century legal and institutional practice. The most recent research has gradually cleared their names and indicated that they are German soldiers instead of the bloodthirsty mercenaries. In 1884, a historian named Lowell noted: “They could not wipe out, to American eyes, the shame of their mercenary calling².” He recorded events related to the Hessians and constructed a narrative, including marches, battles, and the Hessians' captivity. Some reviewers said those words had not existed in English yet. Limited by time constraints, his view of Hessians was negative, as he still regarded them as mercenaries. In his book, he thought the Hessians were butchers and murderers. Given the background of the times, the author had a serious stereotype of the Hessians. In the book, he exhibits confirmation bias. He did not mention the German sources; thus, he overlooked the German aspect of viewpoints. It leads the analysis to ignore most of the evidence between 1776 and 1784. The Hessians should be regarded as contributors rather than enemies.

After the 1900s, modern historians and recent studies have re-certified the name for the Hessians. Historians around the world have stopped considering the Hessians as mercenaries. Instead, historians still did not mention the aspect of being contributors. Most historians of this age, it does record the contributions of the Hessian armies, but all are based on their labor reform

² Edward J Lowell, *The Hessians and the Other German Auxiliaries of Great Britain in the Revolutionary War*. New York: Haper & Brothers, 1884

as prisoners of war and the records of scientists accompanying the army on their expeditions. Rodney Atwood, Friederike Baer, and Daniel Krebs are three influential individuals who have made contributions to this time. They put forward the contributions of the Hessians, even based on their status as prisoners of war. Krebs shows how labor settled prisoners of war in communities during the early years of the Revolutionary War:

Many of the Hessians & Waldeckish Prisoners of War, especially single men, are so well pleased with this Country and the Way of its Inhabitants that at all Events they would rather prefer to settle here than to return to the dreary abodes of Bondage from whence they came³.

He passed the international law, indirectly clearing the disgrace of the Hessians as “merciful enemy”. The Hessians are still regarded as a war army. Still, compared with earlier periods, there are more analyses of the contributions of Hessian soldiers to the United States, even though historians still hold stereotypes about them.

Although recent scholarship has expanded our understanding of Hessian recruitment, battlefield experience, and captivity, scholars have paid far less attention to the years after active combat, when many Hessians lived in American communities as civilians. Their garrison service, scientific observations, religious participation, and everyday interactions with residents hardly appear as central topics in the existing literature.

This historiographical gap leaves the civilian, intellectual, and social dimensions of Hessian life largely unexplored. This paper addresses this gap by turning to Hessian journals, letters, and memoirs that document science, religion, and community life, areas that have received little sustained scholarly analysis.

³ Daniel Krebs, *A Generous and Merciful Enemy: Life for German Prisoners of War during the American Revolution*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013

Reconstructing Hessian Identity: Science, Society, and Faith in Contemporary Writings:

During the Revolutionary War, from 1776 to 1783, the Hessians, German auxiliaries, were consistently labeled as mercenaries. However, according to the primary sources they left, another dimension was introduced for analyzing German soldiers. This essay focuses on four sources: a diary by Johann Ewald, a diary by Johann Dohla, an inspection report by Johann Schoepf, and a diary by priests. These contexts trace the shift from military service to social contribution, biological knowledge, and religious combination.

In 1777, Johann David Schoepf, a German botanist, zoologist, and surgeon of the Hessians, arrived in America. He conducted research and investigated the natural sciences in this new world. He was highly educated, with formal medical training and expertise in natural history. Therefore, his article presented rigor in academia. He primarily wrote about how the United States placed importance on social order, marketing practices, and the effects of the religious community. Additionally, Schoepf appreciated the prosperity and orderliness of the American municipal system and specifically noted the contributions of German immigrants. He wrote about the biology and chemistry of plants and wrote about the usage of these kinds of plant dyes, noting that:

The plant should not grow over-ripe. Indigo-fields require much attention and must be diligently kept clean of caterpillars and weeds. Some 20 negroes are necessary to look after a plantation of 50 acres of indigo land and prepare the indigo, over and above what must be done in raising what they themselves and the planter's household need. In cutting and gathering, the herb must be gingerly dealt with, so that the blueish farina, which covers the leaves and is said to add much to the richness and beauty of the color, may not be rubbed off; nor should the plant be bruised, for if so, its heavy juices spoil the delicacy of the color, which must be got merely by fermentation of the unmangled plants steeped in water. To this end, they are carefully placed in a vessel, the "steeper," 10-15 ft. long and 4 ft. deep, the plants lying 12-15 inches deep, over which water is poured; according to the state of the weather; after 12-18 hours the plants begin to warm of themselves,

swelling and fermenting, ... which happens according to the warmth of the weather in 25-30 minutes, more or less⁴.

In this paragraph, he mainly noted the way of growing the nice indigos, the way to extract the indigo dyes, and some false actions in the extraction process. He adopted the way of process and metrology, from observation to the extraction steps, such as “warming themselves, swelling and fermenting”, then the chemical reactions, and finally the quality criteria⁵. Not only did he praise the practical practices in the plantation of the South of America, but she also summarized and more clearly recorded the method of chemically preparing indigo. This book promoted chemical and biological research that produced natural history materials in the newborn United States. According to the South Carolina Encyclopedia, from 1747 to 1802, the state planted a huge amount of indigo, which is “England’s primary source of blue dye in the late-colonial era⁶.” Therefore, this book is sufficiently trustworthy, but it is not without flaws. Given the historical context, the truly scientific method of chemical extraction was not developed until the mid-1800s; this book continued to guide American science after the war. Thus, this paragraph transforms the observation into a contribution of science, using indigo to illustrate how Hessians made significant contributions to early American chemistry.

In 1777, Johann Conrad Dohla, a normal soldier, journeyed to North America with British troops and other German soldiers. During the time period, most soldiers were from the lower class in the Holy Roman Empire, which was the old German Empire. Therefore, this diary is one of the hardest-earned sources from the Hessians during the Revolutionary War. He primarily defended, patrolled the city, performed protective duties, and guarded within the city in

⁴ Johann David Schoepf. *Travels in the Confederation, 1783–1784*. Translated and edited by Alfred J. Morrison. Philadelphia: William J. Campbell, 1911.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Virginia Jelatis. “Indigo.” South Carolina Encyclopedia, August 5, 2022. <https://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/indigo/>.

his responsibilities; additionally, he participated in the urban defense system. In contrast, he has an intense passion and appreciation for the cultures of different regions. Thus, in his book, he primarily noted his duties and praised America and its abundant resources, especially in Philadelphia. He noted in his book about the culture integration after the war:

In this city, especially in times of peace, there is always a surplus of the items necessary to provide a comfortable life. The lowliest citizens, as well as their wives and daughters, go about dressed in the best and newest French styles, in the most costly silks, calicoes, and chintz, powdered and with their hair curled daily. In short, the entire province of Pennsylvania is the most fertile and blessed land to be found, and Philadelphia would be in the most fortunate circumstances if not for the convulsions of war. April. ... With each volley, old and young gave an extraordinarily loud cheer: „Hyroh for peace! Hyroh for the liberty! Hyroh for Washington! Hyroh for Congress! For Hancock! For ourselves! God save the General Washington, our Master!“ An 18-pound cannon was brought here also, and this was fired more than thirty times from a height before the city. At night, a beautiful fireworks display took place, which was prepared for the Americans by our Artillery Captain [Nikolaus Friedrich] Hofmann and his artificers and cannoneers, for pay. It was very beautiful to see⁷.

In this paragraph, he primarily discussed sightseeing in Philadelphia and cultural integration after the war. He wrote about the lower-class foreigner's side view of American history during the war. He highly praised Philadelphia by using the word “most fertile and blessed” in this paragraph. He then noted that they lived together in peace after the war. Both the American soldiers and the German soldiers are excited about the end of the revolution. In addition, according to the “Hyroh for liberty! God save the General Washington”, we can infer that the German troops also yearned for peace; most of them did not know why they should fight for the British⁸. They had stayed in America for years; therefore, most of them had developed feelings for this place. In addition, the passage “His craftsman and gunners prepared a fireworks display”

⁷ Johann Conrad Döhla, *A Hessian Diary of the American Revolution*, trans. Bruce E. Burgoyne (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990).

⁸ Johann Conrad Döhla, *A Hessian Diary of the American Revolution*, trans. Bruce E. Burgoyne (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990)

depicts the two cultures celebrating the victory together⁹. The craftsman can also bring the new technique to the new America. An article from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University noted that in the Grand Federal Procession of 1788, Philadelphians wore the liberty cap and incorporated elements of the laurel wreath¹⁰. Additionally, a letter from 1775 at Princeton noted that soldiers ranked below subalterns wore green hats.¹¹ Thus, Dohla accurately described the scene of the celebration, but his articles still have some flaws. Because of curiosity about new objects and the same or even worse status of the American lower class, his opinion is entirely based on his own feelings, so the facts are subject to a certain degree of skepticism. Yet, it cannot be denied that he indeed recorded the geography, culture, customs, and cultural exchanges of the United States in the log, promoting public life in America.

In 1776, Captain Johann von Ewald, an officer of the Hessian Jäger, commanded stragglers, conducted reconnaissance and patrols, escorted, and established posts on the front line of the North American battlefield. From his name, we can infer that Johann Ewald was of the upper class; therefore, he received formal military training, indicating familiarity with advanced European tactics. He primarily advocated prioritizing military discipline and order. He also emphasized the humanitarian occupation, which means restrictive protection for civilians and prisoners of war. His book transformed superior military experience into professional, military-specific cases, providing teachable tactical materials for subsequent officers and historians. Also, the maintenance of order during the occupation period reduced disturbance to the local society. He noted the urban defense and order maintenance in the book:

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Alexandra Eyre Dowrey, *The Classics and the Broader Public in Philadelphia, 1783–1788: Avenues for Engagement* (Master's thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2014), 45.

¹¹ "George Washington's Disappearing Ribbon," *Commonplace: The Journal of Early American Life*, accessed October 2025, <https://commonplace.online/article/george-washingtons-disappearing-ribbon>.

On the 30th the army left the field and moved into winter quarters in the city. One thousand men were assigned to the protection of the redoubts, in which wooden guardhouses had been constructed; they were relieved every two days. The entire army arrived in the city for billeting. The Queen's Rangers occupied Kensington, the light infantry were in the outskirts toward Germantown, and the jagers were quartered on the plantations on The Neck, 154 where the Schuylkill flows into the Delaware. The Jager Corps furnished two pickets for the Lower and Upper 155 ferries on the left bank of the Schuylkill River. My quarters, along with thirty men, were with an old Strassburger who could give me a spacious room and a bed. I was heartily glad that I had arrived safely under cover after two very hard campaigns and could stretch my bones peacefully in a bed again. — How sweet is rest, when one seldom enjoys it¹²!

This paragraph is more likely an operational log than a diary. It contains the intensive operation, including troop size, rotation cycle, key checkpoints, and outposts. The purpose of this paragraph is to record verifiable arrangements rather than to be sentimental. From the words “One thousand men”, “every two days”, and “two pickets”, these words were quantifiers that prove his meticulousness and logical thought. Function nouns such as “redoubt” and “pickets” encode the defensive posture and checkpoint security¹³. The paratactic listing of dispositions yields a sense of administrative before pivot, the “How sweet is rest”, which humanizes the log¹⁴. This passage provides verifiable details, such as numbers and units, thereby enhancing its evidentiary weight. Although this book became the military material that early American soldiers used for study, it barely demonstrated the feelings of the local people, and this passage only depicted the records in Philadelphia, so other war zones cannot be simply extrapolated, but it still provided practical material for early American military by listing the tactics in detail.

In 1779, Johann Christoph Wagner, a military chaplain of the Ansbach-Bayreuth Regiment, received rigorous Lutheran theological and liturgical training. During his service in North America with the Hessians, he performed extensive pastoral duties, including

¹² Johann von Ewald, *Diary of the American War: A Hessian Journal*, trans. and ed. Joseph P. Tustin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 110–111.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

administering confessions, Holy Communion, and preaching, and visiting the sick. Not only did he preach his religion inside the barracks, but he also did so on the stage in the city Lutheran church, connecting the troops with the local congregation. In the diary of Döhla, it is mentioned that Wagner:

The Ansbach Chaplain Wagner held confession and communion for the Bayreuth Regiment. 22 April. Chaplain Wagner preached a sermon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the city¹⁵.

Not only Wagner, but another priest named Waldeck also made a connection with the local citizens. Waldeck Regiment was also an educated priest who belonged to the middle status. He observed and noted down the stories and lives he lived in the community:

Den ist Stein. Der Gottesdienst wurde in der lutherischen deutschen Kirche gehalten. Am Abend traf ich in meinem Quartier einen Vorsteher von der lutherischen Kirche an, der mich ersuchte noch diesen Abend ein Kind von ihrer Gemeinde zu taufen. Ich that es, und es gefiel mir so gut daselb, dass ich mich bis um n Uhr verweilte. Man erzählte einzelne Familien Geschichten, und sprach von dem Glick und Seegen welches besonders die Deutschen in diesem Lande gehabt hatten, Noch vor 15 Jahren war nur eine lutherische deutsche Gemeinde in Neujork sie konnten iiber diesen Punkt nicht mit einander iiberein kommen, sondern die Deutschen nahmen ihren Prediger fur sich an, und machten Anstalt zum eigenen Kirchen Bau bis endlich Herr Muhlenberg Prediger an dieser Kirche wird und samlet dadurch die Glieder der Gemeinde wieder¹⁶.

From these sources, we can identify primary sources that are near-contemporaneous, on-the-day notations, which are highly timely. Also, these priests connected both German soldiers with the local citizens. Wagner is more like a practical pastor, while Waldeck is an observational diarist.

Wagner's presence demonstrates the integration of German faith into American worship, while

¹⁵ Johann Conrad Döhla, *A Hessian Diary of the American Revolution*, trans. Bruce E. Burgoyne (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 291.

¹⁶ Philipp Waldeck, *Philipp Waldeck's Diary of the American Revolution*, ed. M. D. Learned (Philadelphia: Americana Germanica Press, 1907), 112. "Den is Stein. The service was held in the Lutheran German Church. In the evening, I met a leader of the Lutheran Church in my quarters, who asked me to baptize a child from their congregation that evening. I did, and I enjoyed it so much that I stayed there until 1 p.m. Individual family stories were told and there was talk of the happiness and blessings that the Germans, in particular, had experienced in this country. Fifteen years ago, there was only one Lutheran German congregation in Neujork. They could not agree on this point, but the Germans adopted their preacher for themselves and made preparations for building their own church. Finally, Mr. Muhlenberg became preacher at this church and thereby gathered the members of the congregation again." Translated by Google Translate

Waldeck's writings preserve a rare, humanized image of German soldiers. However, critically, sources directly from Wagner are hardly found. Wagner was indifferent to fame and fortune, and he left no books or letters. We can only recognize him from others' letters or diaries. Thus, information about him may contain discrepancies in the historical record. On the other hand, these contributions by German pastors cannot be ignored. They connected German Lutheran traditions with American religious culture, injecting new blood into the new country.

In addition, in 1776, Baroness Frederika Charlotte Riedesel, a noblewoman who was the wife of a general. She was highly educated since she could understand French and German. In her view, she noted the unique side to the Hessians and American women. She primarily discussed her life from 1777 to 1781. He also discussed the kindness and assistance from residents, particularly during the Saratoga campaign. She said in her diary:

When the troops had laid down their arms, the American officers came and treated us with the greatest politeness. I cannot describe what I felt at seeing the kindness of General Gates, who did everything to comfort my husband and me. I confess I was deeply moved by the noble conduct of these men, our enemies by fortune, but friends by humanity. The officers invited us to dine with them and offered us refreshments, and their attentions were more like those of friends than victors. Even the common soldiers showed compassion toward our wounded and shared their provisions with the women and children. In the towns through which we passed, I found that many of our German people were already settled there as craftsmen, bakers, and teachers. They spoke both English and German and were respected by the Americans, who praised them for their industry and orderliness. I was glad to see that the Germans were looked upon as useful members of this new country, and that our culture, our language, and our faith were taking root in this foreign soil. Wherever I went, I met kindness, and I could not but believe that there was in this land a spirit of freedom and humanity which reconciled even the misfortunes of war. I thought that if ever peace should be restored, our two nations might live together in friendship, and the Germans, who came as soldiers, might become citizens, helping to cultivate the arts and industry of America¹⁷.

¹⁷ Riedesel, Baroness Frederika Charlotte. *Letters and Journals Relating to the War of the American Revolution, and the Capture of the German Troops at Saratoga*. Translated by William L. Stone. Albany: Joel Munsell, 1867

In this paragraph, “In the towns we passed through, I found that many Germans had already settled there and became artisans, bakers, teachers.”, we can know that most of the Hessians settled down after the war, and she said: “our culture, our language, and our faith were taking root in this foreign soil¹⁸.” She hopes that both Germans and Americans can be neighbors instead of being enemies. In most memoirs, her voice has the most empathy and the least hostility. She also noted the American women during the war in her diary. She said:

The American women, though they have endured the greatest hardships, still retain their gentleness and good humor. I have often admired their courage and composure in times of danger, when even we, accustomed to camp life, trembled¹⁹.

She wrote the strengthening of women during the war, and it provides the documents for the foundational text of early female consciousness and female history writing in early American history. She almost did not have limitations from the background; she was considered a proto feminist. She criticized the war and empathized with the innocent children and women during the war. In contrast, she had some flaws in her viewpoint. Since she came from the upper class, she focused more on upper-class women and seldom wrote about the lower class. However, her historical significance remains indelible, for her writings transformed women’s wartime endurance into part of the historical record itself, setting the foundation for later feminist consciousness in this new world.

Collectively, the primary sources of Philip Waldeck, Johann Conrad Dohla, Johann David Schoepf, Johann von Ewald, and Baroness Frederika Charlotte Riedesel reveal the spiritual, intellectual, and cultural dimensions of Hessian life in the Revolutionary War. Their documents indicate that the Hessians’ contributions extended beyond the battlefield. They

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

preached, recorded, and studied the new things in this new world. In doing so, the Hessians are more than merely contributors; they are not foreign enemies.

Reconsidering Hessian Identity:

This paper argues that the Hessians of the Revolutionary War cannot be simply labeled mercenaries but should be regarded as historical actors who were both passive and active within the 18th-century fiscal-military state system and its treaties. Historiography has gradually shifted from an early narrative that stigmatized them as mercenaries to a research approach that highlights the socio-cultural dimension, providing a foundation for reassessing their historical role. Primary sources reveal that their contributions went beyond the battlefield: Schoepf's observations and records offer a valuable chain of knowledge about local natural history and chemical processes; Dohla's accounts depict postwar urban life and the social integration of German and American celebrations; Ewald's combat logs demonstrate order maintenance and verifiable military expertise; chaplains Wagner and Waldeck incorporated German Lutheran rituals into local religious networks, linking the army and the community; and Riedesel's memoirs not only document the humane treatment of American soldiers but also include women's experiences in war memory. Therefore, the stereotypical view of Hessians as outsiders needs revision. They participated in early American knowledge creation, public life, and religious culture as well. Due to limitations, this paper has not yet systematically compared cases from the South and border regions. Future research could combine marriage records, real estate documents, court registers, and rosters to conduct cross-regional and cross-state comparisons and further explore the transition from military service to civilian life.

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