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From subject to citizen, or, "At once everyone seemed to come alive": Hessian mercenaries gain autonomy and self define during the American Revolution, 1776-1783

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From subject to citizen, or, “At once everyone seemed to come alive”:

Hessian mercenaries gain autonomy and self define
during the American Revolution, 1776-1783.

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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The Prevailing taste of the public for anecdote has been censured and ridiculed by critics who aspire to the character of superior wisdom; but if we consider it in a proper point of view, this taste is an incontestable proof of the good sense and profoundly philosophic temper of the present times. Of the numbers who study, or at least who read history, how few derive any advantage from their labours! The heroes of history are so decked out by the fine fancy of the professed historian; they talk in such measured prose, and act from such sublime or such diabolical motives, that few have sufficient taste, wickedness, or heroism, to sympathise in their fate. Besides, there is much uncertainty even in the best authenticated ancient or modern histories; and that love of truth, which in some minds is innate and immutable, necessarily leads to a love of secret memoirs and private anecdotes. We cannot judge either of the feelings or of the characters of men with perfect accuracy, from their actions or their appearance in public; it is from their careless conversations, their half-finished sentences, that we may hope with the greatest probability of success to discover their real characters. The life of a great or of a little man written by himself, the familiar letters, the diary of any individual published by his friends or by his enemies, after his decease, are esteemed important literary curiosities. We are surely justified, in this eager desire, to collect the most minute facts relative to the domestic lives, not only of the great and good, but even of the worthless and insignificant, since it is only by a comparison of their actual happiness or misery in the privacy of domestic life that we can form a just estimate of the real reward of virtue, or the real punishment of vice. That the great are not as happy as they seem, that the external circumstances of fortune and rank do not constitute felicity, is asserted by every moralist: the historian can seldom, consistently with his dignity, pause to illustrate this truth; it is therefore to the biographer we must have recourse. After we have beheld splendid characters playing their parts on the great theatre of the world, with all the advantages of stage effect and decoration, we anxiously beg to be admitted behind the scenes, that we may take a nearer view of the actors and actresses.  

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Most writings on the Hessians, who were mercenaries from what is today called Germany, tend to focus on their military exploits during the American Revolution; they are understood as soldiers, who are best known for losing the Battle of Trenton on the 26th of December. An identity as a mercenary tends to overwhelm any other characteristics a person may have. This is not necessarily negative, as Hessians were soldiers, but to focus just on that aspect of their identity leaves much unsaid. They were humans as well as soldiers, and had human interactions, and although there are writings which engage with the Hessians as humans, they are sadly in the minority. Exploring Hessian exploits outside of the context of battle allows a deeper understanding of their experience of America. In this project, I focus solely on their non-military experiences (in fact, mostly on their experiences while prisoners of the Continental Army, when they are expressly forbidden to fight) in order to understand why 16 percent of Hessians decided to stay in America after the Revolution was over. This focus on the non-military adds a focus on human individuality to the Hessian narrative in American history.

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2 David Hackett Fischer (2004). *Washington’s Crossing*, is a popular example. Yet even Hessian scholars focus on their soldiering: Edward J. Lowell, *The Hessians* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1884) focuses in chapter 15 on their more personal exploits, but then it is on to the battle; Burgoyne’s *Enemy Views*, although containing more personal anecdotes, focuses largely on the war itself; other books that mention the Hessians in passing frame them solely in the context of war.

3 Bruce E Burgoyne, *These were the Hessians*, (Westminster, Md: Heritage Books, 2008); Rodney Atwood’s *The Hessians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980). These two humanize the Hessians within the American Revolution. Burgoyne is particularly focused on this: “This book is meant to provide you with some general information about the Hessians. I hope you will not be disappointed that it is not primarily about a battle, tactics, or even uniforms. Instead the purpose is to show that the Hessians were human beings, soldiers it is true, but people, the same as their American opponents – many of whom were also of German extraction, and who spoke German in their homes. AND many of the Hessians joined the American army, fighting for American independence, and playing important roles in the history of our country.” p 1.
The Hessians wrote about their rich social experiences with Americans in journals, which was common for residents of the Holy Roman Empire. During the eighteenth century, it was popular for noble sons, having finished military academy or school and before embarking upon a career or higher education, to travel around Europe and, in the form of a journal, note their impressions, experiences, and growth. Journals were seen as a good tool for self-expression, particularly when one’s social standing made it difficult; journals were freeing for those who were oppressed.

The journals Hessians wrote during their time in America stem from this long tradition of journaling. The writer’s agenda varied from journal to journal: some journals were commissioned by a Prince or by another official, whereas others were written to record personal experiences. The former journals contain less personal information, and tend to record in great detail the military exploits of the soldiers. Andreas Wiederhold’s journal is the latter type of journal; he expresses many derisive personal sentiments not only about the Americans, but also about his commanding officers, which suggests that this journal was meant just for him.

A third type of journal was written for private purposes but was later edited with intent to publish. They tend to contain more than one long, themed, undated section,
which is a thesis driven recollection of experiences that was likely written by someone looking back on his American experiences. Wiederhold’s journal also fits this criterion. These journals were considered important enough to be commissioned by a Prince, or published, or both, because up to this point there were very few German-language texts written about America from the perspective of someone who lived in the Holy Roman Empire. Most Hessians were thus gathering stories not only for their own benefit, but also for a larger audience. No matter how private the journals were, it is probable the writer knew the tales within would be shared.

**ANALYTIC METHOD**

Much like in any book, the journal entries must be analyzed to fully understand the Hessians’ experiences. I had the question: What rank is the soldier writing this diary? Only his name, Johannes Reuber, is explicitly presented to the reader, so finding a revealing passage will hopefully tell us more. Since soldier’s interactions are strongly governed by hierarchy, finding a passage in which Johannes relates to another soldier would be most helpful. Below a journal entry dated the 2nd of January, 1776, tells the story of the Tuesday when Johannes’ pending journey to America became real to him.

The Rall Grenadier Regiment remained in Grebenstein until 3 March when we received live ammunition, sixty rounds per man, flints, kettles, flasks, axes and broadaxes, hoes and shovels, knapsacks and linen breadsacks, and everything needed for war. We looked around in bewilderkment and then each

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4 The Platte Grenadier Battalion journal is a good example of this; yet this journal maintains a critical perspective of personal experiences, suggesting a tendency of Hessians to express themselves more freely when in America.
one saw that this was serious. Each one realized there was nothing else to do but remain patient.\(^5\)

Johannes relates himself to many other soldiers with the pronoun “we”. Now, this could be a collective we, used to denote a community. But, in this case Johannes doesn’t seem to be writing about the entirety of the Rall Grenadier Regiment. It is unlikely that an officer would receive his ammunition with the rest of the soldiers, and even less likely that an officer would be carrying “hoes and shovels”, or “knapsacks and linen breadsacks”. What Johannes received was standard military equipment, which every non-officer in his regiment also received. Moreover, upon receiving these supplies, Johannes and his comrades looked “around in bewilderment”, suggesting that they are passive recipients of not only the equipment, but also knowledge of the war and the departure time from Grebenstein. Johannes reveals his lack of control over the situation by writing: “there was nothing else to do but remain patient”. It seems that he passively waited for three months in Grebenstein, and then, upon receiving his equipment, realized that there was nothing he could do but wait until he was shipped to America. The standard equipment which Johannes receives, combined with his passivity and lack of control suggests that Johannes is low ranking, likely not much higher than a private.

**TRANSLATION**

The journals I have been working with have been translated, which I find controversial. There are obvious advantages to working with journals, all of which involve the word “ease”, so I will focus on the bad aspects, as they have more relevance to the reader.

\(^5\) Bruce E. Burgoyne, trans., *Diary of Johannes Reuber*, p 1. [Diary Entry: 2 January, 1776].
First, inherent to translation is a re-imagining or at the very least re-writing of events; one can try to be as accurate as possible, but something will be changed. The question of accuracy is a large one, particularly as there is one major translator of Hessian journals, Bruce E. Burgoyne, and I am inherently wary of using one source, as it were, for my entire project.

Second, it is possible that translating a passage radically changes it. In the following example, I remain unclear as to what happened, and there is no solution other than going to the original source, which I am unable to do at this point in my research. First is a passage from a transcription of Chaplain Waldeck’s journal, second, my direct and literal translation of that passage, and finally, Bruce Burgoyne’s translation of that passage.

So bald ich des Morgens aufstehe, sehe ich zuerst nach der See, ob keine spanische Flotte da ist.
Was wird noch uns werden? und wenn uns auch die Spanier nicht kriegen, so werden wir von selbst endlich auf diesem elenden Sandhuugel aussterben.  

As soon as I stand up in the morning, I look first to the sea, if any Spanish fleet is there.
What will yet become of us? and when we do not also fight the Spanish, then we will finally die out on this wretched hill of sand.

Still one more day survived without Spaniards. As soon as a person awakens, he looks out to sea to check if a Spanish fleet has arrived. What will become of us? Certainly nothing good. If the Spaniards do not get us, we will nevertheless die out in time. That is certain. Germany seems like such a good land where there are all sorts of good fruits to be had. If only wild plums and crab apples grew here. No, even these are too fine for this cursed land. Truly, we ask now for nothing better than wild plums and crab apples. But it is our burden, of all those which life holds, to be robbed of all pleasure.

It would seem that the translator has added a new passage; nowhere in any entries preceding or following the cited journal entry in the transcription does such a passage

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6 Marion Dexter Learned, transcriber, Philipp Waldeck’s Diary of the American Revolution (Philadelphia: Americana Germanica Press, 1907), p 129.
appear. This suggests a grievous error, or perhaps even editorial addition (to improve the story), on the part of the translator. However, there are many other sections where there is a disparity between the transcription and the translation: 14 December 1777; what is marked 3-7 January 1780 in the translation and 2-14 January 1780 in the transcription; 13 October 1777, among many others.

With such a great amount of disparity I do not know whom to trust: the transcriber who seems inherently trustworthy but whose credentials I do not know, or the translator who could more easily be at fault but whose other translations are accurate. Since I am unable to access the original, do I trust neither of them? Perhaps every translation I used is fraught with similar errors. That being said, I have enough fluency in German to distinguish intentional changes from absurdity; I bring these problems to the fore to show their difficulties of working with translation, rather than to convince the reader that I am incapable of grappling with such problems.

Additionally, it is possible that this is just a matter of edition. Since some journals were intended to be published, perhaps both the transcriber and translator were working with different editions. The romantic passage wherein Chaplain Waldeck muses on the values of fruits could have been added later, to make clearer his feelings on patriotism. Thus, what is written into the American historical narrative of the Hessians is different from that written into the German; two historians with the respective nationalities would have different readings of the same day. Burgoyne’s translations define what is currently presented to the American audience, as he is the authority on Hessian journals.

Complicating the American historical narrative of the Hessians is another goal of this project. By writing creatively [discussed below], I attempt to flesh out the narrative and,

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although fiction tends to suggest the opposite, to create realism unachievable by relying solely on isolated journal entries, or even isolated journals.

**Note on the Writing:**

Equally important are commonality and individuality; describing a group accurately requires mentioning both the abstract and the detailed. This project contains sections of historical fiction, which are often based on more than one journal entry as combining sources while maintaining details of individual stories is achieved with grace by Creative Writing. These sections are formatted like quotes, but it will be noted in the footnote if a section of indented, single-spaced text is fiction.

The narrative format allows us to participate in the process by which the Hessians understood their experiences; conversations and inner thoughts that are tangentially present in journal entries can be expanded through creative writing, which is itself a process of understanding how the Hessians presented themselves through their journals. As will be seen throughout the project, the Hessian experience of America is a process which begins with autonomy and ends with a self-definition; creative writing mirrors that process as it brings diverse ideas into a single story whose words are fixed on the page.
INTRODUCTION

Hessian soldiers fought with the British in the American Revolution from 1776-1783 not because they supported the British cause, but because they were soldiers from mercenary states; six Princes within the Holy Roman Empire rented their armies to the British Crown. Since the soldiers were bound to the British Crown solely by money, many were disconcerted by the lack of the familiar in America: their new environment was disordered by war, their Prince was overseas, and their patriotic identities were muddled. Americans were largely responsible for the muddling; many had only heard rumors about these foreign mercenaries, so merged all 30,067 men under one identity, Hessian, though that term comprised six groups with distinct patriotic identities. Some Americans also rumored Hessians to be animalistic, barbaric, even non-human.

Rumors about these mercenaries were possible because the Americans knew little about the Hessians. But soon enough, Hessians confronted Americans in battle, and became known for plundering and killing those who had surrendered. Hatred for the foreign fighters simmered through the land. However, these soldiers did not just fight: once they were captured, as they were most famously in the Battle of Trenton, they were often interned near cities, or housed with Americans. If their captivity did not require interactions with Americans, they were encouraged to explore the city’s society; America’s confederate government hoped that exposure to America would convince the Hessians to join the revolutionaries.  

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8 Although it may confuse the patriotic identities of these soldiers, the term Hessian was, and still is, useful when talking about these men as a whole, so it will be used in that context throughout this essay.  
9 This is an excerpt from one of the pieces of propaganda the Continental Congress published to encourage Hessian desertions: “Were you tempted [to fight in America] by the prospect of exchanging the land you
Interacting with Americans required a sense of self: answering questions about his patriotic, societal, and personal identity required that a Hessian examine his relationship to country, society, and self in the free and disordered American context, a context that lacked the familiar criterion against which Hessians usually defined themselves. Absence of the familiar began not just in America, but once the Hessians boarded the ship taking them to America. The ship and sailors disconcerted the Hessians; the language was different, they were as useful as luggage, and most in and around the ship was unknown. This environment provoked those same questions that Hessians would ask themselves while conversing with Americans; this process of questioning gave the Hessians autonomy.

Autonomy was being redefined during the 17th and 18th centuries. Its etymology (auto [self] + nomos [law]) indicates self-governing or imposing law on oneself; it was a pejorative term in ancient Greek, as putting one’s judgments above those of one’s city was a violation of Greek norms. In the 1700s, though, Rousseau argued that freedom for the individual consists of obedience to self-imposed law, and that the state’s rule derives from laws which the people, in accordance with public desire, impose on themselves.\(^\text{10}\)

Closer to home for the Hessian soldiers were Kant’s musings on autonomy: he suggested that everyone is responsible for their actions, thus every moral agent is both an end in itself and a being capable of legislating morality for itself; every moral agent must not ask himself “what is it in my interest to do?” but “what am I obliged to do?” Once a

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Mercenaries, who do not necessarily have an ideological drive to fight, can question their obligations. While not fighting, and particularly once captured, Hessians likely examined their ability to author their actions and their relationship to the authority in America and in their homelands, engaging, whether sub- or consciously, in a discussion of autonomy.

This discussion mirrored the questions raised by the Declaration of Independence: How autonomous is one? What rights does one have? How does one relate to government? The Enlightenment ideals in the Declaration of Independence were not necessarily foreign to the Hessians, but never before had they seen these ideals so embodied. For most of them, the idea of a society with individual autonomy and without a monarch\footnote{This, argues Hannah Arendt, was the true revolutionary idea of the American Revolution: \textit{On Revolution}, (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1965), pp 23-25, 34 [Although I would urge you to read the entire introduction.]} was so unknown as to be unappealing, but for roughly 5,000, the prospect of autonomy through “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” led them to define themselves not as Hessians, but as Americans.\footnote{This new self-definition required another understanding of autonomy: as George Washington said, if the citizens of the United States “should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be entirely their own.” George Washington, \textit{Circular Letter}, dated June 18, 1783. Found on: http://books.google.com/books?id=zls3AQAAMAAJ&source=gbs_navlinks_s}

These mercenaries chose to become citizens rather than subjects; in that moment they expressed their Rousseauian autonomy in the same fashion as their comrades returning to
their Princes\textsuperscript{14}: they imposed the laws they agreed with on themselves. However for all Hessians, self-definition within a government meant a loss of Kantian autonomy: their obligations to their society were not independent and personal, but were legislated by their government.

That moment of self-definition is the climax of the Hessian experience of America: throughout the war, Hessians questioned their obligations to other soldiers, to their commanding officers, to their homes, to their identity as a soldier, and more. This was a process of exploring autonomy through self-defining; that process ended with a choice of government, a choice which expressed autonomy and involved a specific self-definition. For those soldiers who stayed in America, the specificity was still being determined, since the US Constitution was not written until 1787; those who stayed agreed with the ideology expressed in the Declaration of Independence, and it is with those ideals that they defined themselves.

Baby octopuses leave their home for the first time. Having feasted on their mother’s flesh for the last time, they float rather helplessly through a foreign world. Colored light glances off their skin, and a part of them changes to match. Their environment is far too complex for them to comprehend as of yet, but this does not stop them from exploring. Their tiny legs grasp anything new, and their changing skin blends into the colors around them; they are mottled from diverse environment. Despite this camouflage, many of them

\textsuperscript{14} But, if some Hessians remained ideologically tied to their home society, is it accurate to present their experience in America as autonomous? It is accurate in this sense: the world of the ship and of America was so foreign that all Hessians had to make a choice: do I, as an individual, want to remain tied to my old society, or do I want to tie myself to this new society? Or, if neither choice is particularly appealing: how do I incorporate aspects of these two societies into my life? Either way, the Hessians had to make a choice after encountering the foreign, and merely making that choice provided an autonomy that would not have been accessible to them had they never left their home society.
die; others grow. Finally, these baby octopuses each find a cave to climb into, where they can make a home, and where their color will always be the same.

**WHENCE**

The dominant spirit [...] that haunts this enchanted region, and seems to be a commander in chief of all the powers of the air, is the apparition of a figure on horseback without a head. It is said by some to be the ghost of a Hessian trooper, whose head had been carried away by a cannon ball, in some nameless battle during the revolutionary war, and who is ever and anon seen by the country folk, hurrying along in the gloom of night, as if on the wings of the wind.\(^\text{15}\)

The enchanted region described above is somewhere in upstate New York. *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* was written one generation after the American Revolution, when the Hessians were a constant but ambiguous presence in America; the war concluded, roughly 5,000 of them had preferred to stay rather than return to their homeland in the Holy Roman Empire.

The questions springing to your mind are probably similar to those asked by the Americans a little more than two centuries ago; the main question: What exactly is a Hessian? The term “Hessian” refers to soldiers from certain states in the Holy Roman Empire, namely Hesse-Kassel, Hesse-Hanau, Brunswick Wolfenbüttel, Waldeck, Ansbach-Bayreuth, and Anhalt-Zerbst. They were called Hessians because the largest group of soldiers, 12,992 of the total 30,067 men, came from Hesse-Kassel.\(^\text{16}\)


\(^{16}\)As mentioned before, “Hessian” is a useful term. Nevertheless, the unique heritage of a soldier will be referred to whenever possible, as noting their birthplace makes the Hessian experience more accurate and, at times, more surprising: a Hessian regiment from Waldeck, amazed to find that the chief of a Native
But before traveling to their specific birthplaces, we must examine the Holy Roman Empire (which roughly corresponds to modern day Germany). As a whole, the Holy Roman Empire was changing with the speed of cool honey. Those who were ruled had been rebelling against their rulers for centuries, and political contracts between these two forces were constantly being negotiated. Perhaps the most famous example of this is the 1525 Peasants’ War, which was the largest and most wide-spread revolution in Europe until the French Revolution in 1789. Struggles by the peasants for their rights were fairly common across the Holy Roman Empire; which suggests that the feudal system of government was beginning to dissolve.  

Although Hesse-Cassel (a state which is, for our purposes, representative of the general Hessian experience as it gave the British Crown the largest group of mercenaries – 12,000; in addition, it was a state obsessed with governing like its neighbors) did not experience any revolutions in the years leading up to 1776, meaning that none of the Hessian soldiers would have had direct experience with revolution. The general atmosphere of revolutionary change combined with an influx of Enlightenment ideals into Hesse-Cassel gave some Hessian soldiers experience with revolutionary ideology; Hessians may have critically examined their role in society even before leaving for America.  

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American tribe in South Carolina is a German-speaking white man, was more amazed to discover that he was a “fellow countryman, a Waldecker”.  


18 This questioning could be understood in the narrative of the Protestant Reformation in the Holy Roman Empire, as presented by Thomas Brady, who argues that Germany was largely shaped by the Protestant and Catholic movements, as they fought for influence over the Holy Roman Empire. For our purposes, these movements can be understood as encouraging critiques of one’s society. Brady references three other historians: Peter Blickle, who argues that grassroots communal institutions grew during the late medieval agrarian crisis, then gained a religious voice during the Protestant Reformation, which makes the Peasants’ War of 1525 the turning point of German history, as it was, he argues, a point where town and land united under the concept of a “people’s reformation”; Heinz Schilling and Wolfgang Reinhard argue that the Catholic, Protestant, and Calvinist Reformations were part of first church-sponsored (1550-1650), then
Another aspect of life in 18th century Holy Roman Empire present in the Hessian homelands was the merchant guild system. A merchant guild is an elite association of workers which controls everything about a specific trade, such as blacksmithing, in a defined area. Guilds controlled the trade of goods, and as a result were incredibly powerful. Their social capital was useful to those who were “in”, and hurtful to those who were “out”: strict membership regulations made it almost impossible to change careers. The absence of guilds in America was very attractive to the Hessians, and most residents of the Holy Roman Empire, as it meant they could switch careers until they found one which was enjoyable. During the late 18th century, guilds came under criticism throughout Europe; they were seen as restrictive to free trade, technology sharing, and business development.19

Scarcity of land was also common to the Holy Roman Empire, particularly in Hessian lands. Limited space within the Holy Roman Empire and inheritance practices meant the Hessians would have seen their potential farmland either split into ever more unusable sections (partible inheritance), or, more commonly, given all to the eldest son

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19 Karl Marx explains in his *Communist Manifesto*: “The feudal system of industry, under which industrial production was monopolised by closed guilds, now no longer sufficed for the growing wants of the new markets. The manufacturing system took its place. The guild-masters were pushed on one side by the manufacturing middle class; division of labour between the different corporate guilds vanished in the face of division of labour in each single workshop.” Also see: Sheilagh Ogilvie, "Guilds, efficiency, and social capital: evidence from German proto-industry," *Economic History Review*, May 2004, Vol. 57 Issue 2, pp 286-333.
(primogeniture, which would have been favorable to some).\textsuperscript{20} In America, though, there was so much land they were giving it away: any Hessian who deserted the British army to join the Continental would receive 50 acres of land, and the rates only went up for those who were higher ranking. This was one of the main ways the Americans attempted to weaken the Hessian forces and was told to the Hessians whenever possible; such propaganda may have compelled many Hessians to remain in America.

The final factor common to part of the Holy Roman Empire was the devastating effect of the Seven Years War. This involved most of the great powers of the time, and was fought between 1754 and 1763 in Europe, North America, Central America, West Africa, India, and the Phillipines. The war ravaged the economy of some states within Holy Roman Empire, as it destroyed population, land, and trade.\textsuperscript{21} An example of the effects of the war can be seen in the following letter, which passed between a father and his son in Pennsylvania. It is without a known origin in one of the roughly eighteen hundred German states that make up present-day Germany, but wherever the letter did come from, the sentiments in it echoed enough common sentiment that it was reproduced in a newspaper called the \textit{Staatsbote} on August 27, 1762.

At present, nobody wants to go to America because the voyage over the Ocean is too insecure. But if once more there should be peace so that one can risk the sea travel again, I think that many will emigrate to America. Grain is again very expensive here, oats cost six dollars and rye even ten. Here we have suffered so much from the war that I would need much time and paper in order to describe it all. Thievery is rampant and although a few are caught, it does not decline because one puts only the poor into jail while the rich and outwardly respectable are left free even if they are guilty. There are so many of them at night that they surround the houses in which they know money to be, some of them break into the houses, tie the people’s hands and feet, break into boxes and lockers, torture

\textsuperscript{20} Discussed later in more detail in the context of Hesse-Cassel.

\textsuperscript{21} Also discussed later in more detail in the context of Hesse-Cassel.
the owners and press them to tell where they have the money. [...] You see, my son, that you have acted wisely that you left this bad, unjust and corrupt country.22

HESSE-CASSEL

The devastation described above was present in Hesse-Cassel as well. Their capital city, once described as one of the prettiest cities in the world, was now described as one of the ugliest. The people were poor and starving.23 “Long lines of burghers besieged the town’s bakeries, often going two or three days without eating. By 1772 the mortality rate had risen by 70 percent and did not return to normal levels until 1775.”24 The lower class responded to this crisis in two ways: emigrating to a different state in the Holy Roman Empire, or joining the army; the latter course of action was expected.

The otherwise poor government could afford to pay soldiers because of the divisive way it was constructed: there were three parts to the government: the Bureaucracy, the Diet, and the Landgraf (or Prince). Although the Landgraf, Friederich II, had the final say over all aspects of government, they were funded differently: the Diet and Bureaucracy mainly gained money through taxes, while the Landgraf mainly gained money through renting soldiers to other lands; the latter was much more profitable. So, even though the non-royal half of government was very poor, the Landgraf could still afford to pay each

24 Ibid, p 91.
soldier 1.5 taler per month. This proved to be an attractive offer: the soldier citizen ratio was 1:15.

The government handled this crisis partly by strictly controlling their population through constantly introducing new ordinances: Friederich’s regime averaged 1 new ordinance per week; through control the government sought the enforced happiness of its population. However, many of these ordinances were unhelpful, mostly due to the government’s tendency to copy whatever its neighbors were doing, regardless of whether it applied to Hesse-Cassel or not. “One contemporary essay written near the end of the reign cited a combination of ‘despotism, slowness, and fearfulness’ of bending rules as the single biggest problem facing the Hessian peasantry. It also repeated the often-heard complaint against officials enforcing rules that were inappropriate for local conditions.”

The Hessian peasantry also faced problems raised by the *Hufen-Edikt* of 1773. This ordinance, coming on the heels of agrarian crises in 1770 and 1771, forbade the subdivision of plots of land less than one *Hufe*, or roughly 18 acres; this prevented peasants from partible inheritance, in which the land was merely divided up among the heirs. This saved many poorer peasants from further poverty, and pushed many potential heirs out of the village or into the army. Marriages decreased as young men could not support a family, and young women had no dowry to offer; begging and vagabondage increased dramatically.

This type of poverty prevented any substantive action against the government, as the people simply relied on it too much. However, this did not mean that revolutionary or

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26 Ibid, p 32.
27 Ibid, p 51.
Enlightenment ideology was absent in Hesse-Cassel. There were groups such as the Hessian free-masons, all of whom proposed utilitarian change and Enlightenment ideals. But, all they did was propose it; there were no real revolutionaries bent on actual change. This was in part because the society was just not dissatisfied with itself, and also because the old regime had not discredited itself to the same extent it had in, for example, France.²⁹

It was in this environment that Friederich II promised the British Crown 12,000 soldiers, a number which was driven more by desire for money than actual feasibility. The Hessian force was then increased by foreign soldiers and others clearly unfit for active duty. This was in part because many Hessians eligible to fight emigrated in order to avoid recruitment, or deserted. However, many of the soldiers were army regulars, and were willing to go. Those who deserted mainly did so out of fear “of the Atlantic crossing, the exaggerated perils of the American wilderness, and the inevitable separation from their families”, rather than an opposition to fighting a foreign war.³⁰

In fact, many saw this foreign war as a great opportunity, and took advantage of Friederich’s desperation for soldiers:

In some instances foreign officers actually resigned their commissions to accept lower-ranking positions in the Hessian service [...] the greatest number hoped to start a new life in America. The government had realized from the beginning that many of its native and foreign recruits intended to settle in the New World, a prospect it did not discourage among foreigners, so long as they served their full term of duty beforehand. It found much more disturbing the likelihood that the same held true for a considerable number of Hessian recruits.³¹

²⁹ Ingrao, Hessian Mercenary State, pp 10, 33-36.
³⁰ Ibid, p 140.
The government’s trepidation about Hessians living in America proved to be founded: roughly 16% of the soldiers ended up staying there after the war’s end.

**SELF-DEFINING INDIVIDUALS**

But, entering the new American society was no easy feat, as the Hessians would have to be accepted into American society. A good example of how difficult this was is found even today in Tim Burton’s film adaptation of *Sleepy Hollow*:

The Horseman was a Hessian mercenary, sent to our shores by German princes to keep Americans under the yoke of England. But unlike his compatriots who came for money, the Horseman came [...] for love of carnage [...] and he was not like the others [...] To look upon him made your blood run cold, for he had filed down his teeth to sharp points to add to the ferocity of his appearance. This butcher would not finally meet his end till the winter of seventy-nine [...] not far from here in our Western Woods…

The portrayal of Hessians more than two centuries after their first encounters with Americans is the same as it was when some of them debarked in 1776: they are seen as animalistic, bloodthirsty, and moneyhungry. For example, after Julius Wasmus, a surgeon to the Brunswick Dragoons, was captured by the Continental Army and entered his host’s house, “a little girl of almost 5 years started to scream frightfully because she thought we were Savages. They had told the people before hand we were cannibals, the Savages from Germany, etc.”

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31 Ibid, p 141.
33 Prof Helgadob Saratoga NHP, trans., *Journal Julius Wasmus, Surgeon to the Brunswick Dragoons*. [22 September, 1777].
These Hessians, as well as many others, attempted during interactions with Americans to counteract this reputation. Even though the little girl in Wasmus’ story was initially terrified, he writes: “[y]et, before we went to bed, we had already made friends with the little darling.” Wasmus became the little girl’s friend, and subsequently the community’s; by interacting with the townspeople outside of Boston, MA, as a human, not a Hessian, he was able to change his status as an outsider from that of a German Savage, to someone who was admired as a curiosity at social events.

The ability to define oneself was something unique to the Hessian experience of America; the other forces in the war had already made themselves known through previous interactions. Hessians, on the other hand were new. This newness was especially apparent once the Hessians were captured by the Continental Army, as they were not allowed to fight and thus were forced to abandon their identity as soldiers, but were allowed to retain their identity as individuals.

Because, unlike the British, the Hessians had uncertain ideological ties, they were allowed to explore the American society. Most Hessians could work on farms and attend church unsupervised. Washington explicitly ordered that the Hessians work in the German counties of America, in accordance with the Continental Congress’ advice that they might be “acquainted with the situation and circumstances of many of their Country men who came here without a farthing of property and have by care and industry

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34 Ibid.
acquired plentiful fortunes.”

During his wanderings in a city, Hessians could meet women, fall in love, and get married. If the Hessian were an officer, he could travel great distances to get pay for him and his soldiers, or host parties where high-ranking socialites, such as General Washington’s daughter, were present. The Hessians were generally reliable prisoners, although there are advertisements for runaway Hessians, and so, though restricted by their status as prisoners, were allowed to be autonomous agents in America.

PREJUDICE

When the Hessians arrived in America they were preceded by a wave of German-speaking emigrants so large that at the time of the American Revolution Pennsylvania’s population was 50-60 percent German-American; after the majority of the Hessians departed, German-Americans would continue to be the largest group of non-British emigrants for many years. Although Hessians are not often considered in German-American history because of the unusual way they entered American society, they played an important role in that history; 5,000 new emigrants suddenly altered America’s ethnic makeup.

37 Executive Committee to General Washington, December 28, 1776. Record Group 360, Papers of the Continental Congress.
38 Bruce E. Burgoyne, trans., Diary of an Electoral Hesse Officer (Andreas Wiederhold), from 7 October 1776 to 7 December 1780. (1994), p 53-5.
Before the Hessians arrived, emigration from the Holy Roman Empire to America could be characterized by three factors: 1, the emigrants had come from regions in the south-western Holy Roman Empire in which they had only recently begun to establish homes; 2, the emigrants had a traditional tendency to migrate in response to political upheaval, economic instability, and religious persecution; 3, the emigrants were of dissenting religious beliefs, and had enough money to finance a move to America. The Hessians joined this wave of emigration more temporally than ideologically: the main reasons they cite for staying, greater personal freedom, and marriage, are more similar to the third wave of German emigrations. The Hessians do not mention religious motivation, or a history of migration.

Previous emigration had given Americans experience with the German-speaking emigrants, so the Hessians were, in part, defined in relation to that group of Americans. German-Americans, however, sought to distance themselves from the Hessians and as a result they and the Hessians did not get along well: “Local Pennsylvania Germans were simply aghast when Hessian prisoners were placed near their homes in America. After all, German institutional militarism had been one of their principal reasons for leaving Germany in the first place.” Additionally, since almost all early German-speaking emigrants to America were religious dissidents; they may have been threatened by mercenaries whose late Prince had ties with Catholicism. Both of these German-speaking groups felt little affiliation with one another, in part because of the highly

localized patriotism inherent to the fractured Holy Roman Empire, and each considered themselves to be superior.

Around 1815, the characteristics of the emigrants changed: they left because of social and political pressures, and were mainly protesting liberals who wanted to escape military service and saw America as land of freedom and progress. After WWI, the reasons for emigration became what we think of today as common: no chance for a career or personal success in one’s homeland. As the history of German-Americans progressed the Hessians faded into the background. “Hessian” became a dirty word in American culture: it was used to mean a ruthless mercenary who didn’t care for anything but money and blood.

Over time, however, the Hessians did blend in with both the German- and American cultures, which seemed to be what most of them wanted, anyway. But, like the Headless Horseman roaming in the backwoods, they linger, at least within the larger German-American context; those who claim German ancestry make up 17.1% of the United States population, according to a 2009 census, making them the biggest ethnic group by a wide margin. While I was researching in archives, I would often overhear older folks attempting to discover which of the Hessian soldiers they were related to, and their origins in America. But we must jump farther back, to the moment a diverse group of soldiers from different states with different patriotic sentiments and reasons for enlisting, whom we named the Hessians, were packed onto the ship to America like so much luggage.

42 Frederick III, the Landgrave of Hesse-Cassel during the later 18th century, was preceded by his father, who secretly converted to Catholicism in 1749, which, once it was discovered, was scandalous given the government’s previous Protestantism.
“[M]en were forcibly torn from their wives and children and sons from fathers and mothers. It was a terrible parting as each one said the final farewell. The sobbing of mothers and children, parents and families, was so great that we had to be driven out.”


CHAPTER ONE

Sung in front of the royalty by Hessian soldiers as they left Kassel in 1775: 45

Juchheiße nach Amerika, Hurrah to America,  
dir Deutschland gute Nacht! You, Germany, good night! 
Ihr Hessen, präsentiert’s Gewehr, You Hessians, present your arms, 
Der Landgraf kommt zur Wacht. The Landgraf comes to inspect

Ade, Herr Landgraf Friederich, Goodbye, Herr Landgraf Friederich,  
du zahlts uns Schnapps und Bier! You pay us schnapps and beer! 
Schießt Arme man und Bein uns ab, If our arms and legs are shot off, 
so zahlts sie England nach. England will pay you back.

The ship was the first environment in which the Hessians were encouraged both to
express their individuality and subvert existing power structures. In both cases, the sailors
were the main influences on the Hessians, both through social interactions and their
actions: the sailors taught the Hessians English, giving them linguistic autonomy; they
encouraged the Hessians to trade rum with them, which was a subversion of the ship’s
power structure; in one instance, the ritual the sailors put the Hessians through both gave
the soldiers the confidence to enter America, and called into question the Hessians’
relationships to their commanders; and the sailors constantly displayed disrespect for
their hierarchical superiors, which was the sailors’ main way of protecting their rights as
individuals.

During the time on the ship, the vast majority of soldiers had their first experiences
with the foreign, meaning all which was strange or unfamiliar; their reactions to the
foreign in the environment of the ship informs our understanding of their reactions to the
foreign once in America. The foreign inherently provokes questions about the familiar:

45 Heide Buhmann und Hanspeter Haeseler, Das kleine dicke Liederbuch: Lieder und Tänze bis unsere Zeit
Who am I, both as a person and as a patriot? How can I describe myself to those who are completely unfamiliar to me? How do I want to exist within this environment? These questions, first raised on the ship ride over, continued to hound the Hessians until they got back to their homeland, or made a new one; having to self-define calls one’s relationship to everything into question; in the politically active space of the ship, the question of autonomy constantly arose.

In one instance, these autonomous dissidence was expressed before the ship even left for America:

The 10th [of March, 1777] - This was a memorable day as the regiments went on land, early and without permission, where they were allowed to cook. They were then to embark; the Jaegers first and then the Eye Regiment. When it was the turn for the Bayreuth Regiment, its grenadiers began a serious rebellion, which the others joined. They fled and our corps was ordered to stop them. We were ordered to fire at them and this was done, killing some and wounding others. I encountered those being pursued at the Cloister Tueckelhausen, into which some deserters had fled, and remained there until I received orders during the evening to return to Uffenheim to allow the musketeers’ hatred to cool off.46

THE SHIP:

The only way to get to America was by boat, so every Hessian soldier was shipped to America. The route by sea often began in Amsterdam, with a stop in England, before embarking on the six week journey to America. The ship taking the Hessians to America was the first foreign space they experienced. Once they could no longer see “Lands End” (the furthest reach of England jutting into the sea) the Hessians were in a new world. And

what a world it was: the ship was run by the captain and his sailors, who barked and swore at each other in a largely incomprehensible language; the blue or white of the ocean and sky enveloped the ship; only the captain and his mate were able to calculate the ship's location; the belly of the ship, where everyone slept and where some ate and drank, was dark, mostly airless, and filled with the smell of rotting water and the long unclean bodies of men and animals.

In order to make sense of this world, the Hessians asked questions of the sailors about their current environment: *What is the name of that very large fish swimming near our ship? It must be 20 feet long! A grampus, you say?* The Hessians considered the sailors to be experts on all things maritime, but their expertise was not merely limited to the journey over. Most of them had been to America before, and thus were asked about their experiences in America. *What is New York like?* The sailors were accessible sources of information for any Hessian soldier, particularly those lower in rank; sharing a low rank and poor background provided a context within which to commiserate, as well as swap stories and information.

The language barrier was not impenetrable, as some sailors could speak a pidgin German, and some Hessians, mostly the officers, could speak some English. Although no Hessian explicitly writes of a sailor answering his questions, their diary entries reveal

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48 The sailors would have had plenty to say to this last question, even more so if the Hessian had asked them about Charleston, or Boston. Sailors who worked on ships traveling to America did not merely get to shore, unload their cargo, and get right back on the ship, but instead would often desert soon after reaching land, would spend some time in America, and then find another job once the money ran out. The Chesapeake Bay area was particularly notorious for deserting sailors, as there were more ships there than sailors to run them. Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, which were trading hubs, were places in which the sailors would have spent substantial amounts of time and would have as a result a detailed understanding of the city and its culture.
knowledge about the ocean that could have only come from a sailor. It is unlikely that Valentine Asteroth, before journeying to America, knew that fish flying onto the deck of the ship was a sign that the wind would be against them, and much more likely that he, shocked at fish flying from the ocean onto the boards at his feet, asked a sailor what was happening.

**SHARING INFORMATION**

Conversations between soldiers and sailors were mostly about natural phenomena. Christian Theodor Sigismund von Molitor, who seems to be the most curious of all the journalers, described “the so-called Portuguese man-of-war, which […] up close […] can cause problems.” One can almost hear the sailor struggling to put the horrors of jellyfish stings into simple English, or broken German. That the Hessians were naturally curious about their surroundings is evident from their descriptions of porpoises, whales, and other sea-fauna.

But their questions did not stop there: highly trained mercenaries are not immune to the same impulse that compels a child to ask, *are we there yet?* The following series of

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diary entries shows, through conversations about the location of the ship and the length of the journey, the changing relationship between the sailors and the soldiers.

At noon the captain and the mate take observations of the height of the sun with quadrants and thereby determine the latitude at which the ship is. The captain let us take part in this. The English are not eager to satisfy the curiosity of a traveler about the sea voyage. [13 May, 1776]^{50}

Perhaps the ship’s captain, described in an earlier entry as “an amiable, pleasant man,” was the only one willing to share geographic location with the Hessians. “The English” are, by implication, the sailors.

The sailors explained to us that we had already sailed 262 German miles [1572 English miles] and the voyage was going very slowly. Because of this the sailors laughed at us. [4th July, 1776]^{52}

One can imagine the sailors’ laughter at the gloomy faces of the Hessians. Unlike the sailors, the Hessians were uncomfortable on the ship, as it was likely for all of them their first time at sea. Hessians complained of vomiting, of the miseries of the smells of the ship, and of the poor quality of food and drink served to them.

[T]he six men divide the pudding. The same procedure is used with the meat – one piece for six men, which is then divided into six pieces. The one who divides it points with his fork and asks who should have it. Another [of his men], who has turned away, gives the answer. It would be a great pleasure to watch this activity if the portions of meat were not so small.^{53}

The sailors, in contrast, if not happy with the hardships of their life at sea, were at least used to it.

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51 Burgoyne, *Reuber*, p 3. [12 April, 1776].
52 Ibid., p 13.
The sailors told us soldiers we would soon arrive in North America. However, we no longer believed that there was land on the other side because we had hoped for it for such a long time. [26th July, 1776]  

The journey’s length drove Hessians to despair. The sailors, too, appear depressed about the journey’s length thus far, as there is no laughter after their statements. 

The sailors again consoled us that we would soon see land, but we no longer believed them. They have deceived us too often. [13th August, 1776] 

It is now exactly three months not since the journey began, but since this series of diary entries began. The even longer journey in the confined space of the ship depressed the Hessians so much that their new comrades could not comfort them. The relationship between the soldiers and the sailors was formed not merely by interactions between men, but also by external influences, such as the length of the journey, or a storm. Those trapped on a ship for over three months would naturally go through phases of camaraderie, and hostility.

The length of the journey was not the only subject of conversation, however. Although it is not explicitly noted, Hessians must have spoken with the sailors about their lives, about what it is like to be a mercenary, about their feelings about the Revolution and about going to America; these conversations would have brought an outside perspective to the Hessians’ understanding of their situation. The sailors, whose livelihood depended on being able to curse at the captain when necessary, may have

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53 Burgoyne, *Enemy Views*, p 24. [Private Reuber, part of the 1st Division; 29th May 1776]  
encouraged the soldiers towards autonomy, or at the very least brought a critical eye to the Hessians’ social, military, and political obligations.

**ISOLATION AND CRISES**

During the times of hostility, the Hessians would close themselves off as a community in order to find some comfort in familiarity. Such a motivation would cause this incident: “[w]e soldiers cheated the sailors because we had only oat gruel this day, but some had taken the fat from the salt meat and put it on the cooked meal in order to make the food taste better.”

56 Frustration with the food quality is often a frustration with a loss of the familiar. The Hessians were not just stealing a bit of fat, they were perhaps attempting to recreate a homey taste in their meal because they were feeling alienated from their surroundings. 57 This theft was an attempt to reappropriate the space of the ship and carve out a section that was theirs and transform this foreign space into one in which the Hessians had agency. This drive, although perhaps pure in intention, had negative repercussions: the cook subsequently refused to cook for the soldiers, saying that he was only obligated to cook for the sailors, which isolated the two communities all the more.

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56 Burgoyne, *Reuber*, p 13, [9th July, 1776]
57 Similarly, a Hessian officer, during his long trip to America, fixates on coffee to recreate a sense of home:
“Because of a shortage of coffee, today we had to begin the sorry practice of drinking it once a day. I knit diligently on the netting to somewhat reduce my brooding over the coffee.” p 12. [May 27 1776]
“We believed we would sail to St. Michael, and Lieutenant von Wurmb therefore, with this fond hope, made coffee even before I left my bed. I acted the good companion and excused his zeal as it was still uncertain that we would stop there.” They ended up not stopping there, he was very upset as a result. pp 21-2. [28 June 1776]
Once on land “We bought fresh fish and coffee, which we had been without for so long.” pp 32-3. [14 April 1776]
However, not all external influences resulted in isolation. Certain crises, such as the death of a sailor or the birth of a storm, brought these two communities together. When a violent storm destroyed a part of a ship, “[t]welve soldiers, who were relieved every two hours, were assigned to help the sailors” until the storm abated. As a storm was cracking around them and the fear of imminent death was overpowering, these two communities joined forces in order to save themselves. This was not always the case; in fact during most storms the Hessians were stowed below deck like the luggage they were in order to prevent them from getting in the way. In this case, however, the Hessians’ help was needed, and it is a testament to their relationship with the sailors that they were able to aid them when necessary. Their relationship was doubtless strengthened as a result; death, or fear of it, commonly creates bonds between people and communities.

COMMUNICATION

The language barrier between the sailors and the soldiers did not seem to be strong, and certainly did not make communication too difficult. This was likely due to a combination of the Hessians’ partial knowledge of English, and the sailors’ partial knowledge of German. The sailors were worldly travelers, and it is very likely that some of them could

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58 Burgoyne, trans., J.R. p 2. [24th April, 1776]
59 Chaplain Waldeck describes the horrors of a storm: “It is difficult to believe that so terrible a night will ever occur again. […] The heaven was entirely black. […] we got into our wretched cabins. Lightning, thunder, rain, and the power of the waves, which tossed the ship first to one side and then the other, conspired to produce all of the terrors which nature is able to provide simultaneously. It even tore loose everything in the cabin which was not firmly tied. […] if someone were to fall out of bed, he most certainly would have been crushed by the trunks which were tumbling back and forth or have broken his neck in short order. And I am convinced that the entire motion of the ship was as it must certainly be if one were to roll down a mountain in a barrel.”
William E. Dorneman, trans., A Diary Kept by Chaplain Waldeck During the Last American War.
speak German. Since these ships were commissioned specifically to take Hessian soldiers from England to America, it is probable that sailors with a decent knowledge of German were picked. Johannes Reuber jotted down an example of a pidgin German: “Toward noon a dark cloud appeared. Suddenly the sailors all came to us and spoke to us soldiers, ‘Solltscher alle daun, perrehaend, weggest’” (soldiers all down, bear a hand, go away!). This command is a mixture of Johannes’ interpretation of what the sailors were saying, and the broken German that the sailors were able to speak.

The sailors, given their international background, were quite used to creating pidgin languages. In fact, this was one of the main ways the captain and the crew would communicate; a mixture of languages from the sailors many backgrounds, combined with a detailed dictionary for every natural phenomenon, animal, and piece of equipment, created a unique pidgin. Jack Cremer, a new sailor, describes the complexity and affects of this language: “I was not taken notice of for a day or two, nor could I think what world I was in, weather [whether] among Spirits or Devills. All seemed strange; different languidge and strange expreshions of tonge, that I always thought myself a sleep or in a dream, and never properly awake.” Living on a ship for the first time was a strange experience. The Hessians would have been even more at a loss than Jack Cremer. In order to understand what the sailors were saying and understand what was happening in this new world, they would have had to study this pidgin intensely.

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60 Rediker, *Deep Blue Sea*, pp 79-80; 87.
62 “Perrehaend” has been translated as “bear a hand”, an English phrase the sailors were likely using; Johannes, perhaps trying to fit the sounds into German, made it all one word, substituted a “p” for the “b” and an “a” for the “e”, and used the combination of ae, which can be written in German also as ã, to make the English “a” in “hand”. “Perrehaend” doesn’t, however, mean anything in German. “Weggest” appears to be a combination of the German imperative “Geh weg!” (go away!) and the verb weggehen, meaning to go away, declined into the second person informal “gehst weg” (you go away).
Just as the sailors may have improved their German by speaking with the Hessians, so did the soldiers learn English from the sailors: Johannes Reuber writes: “[f]rom our sailors we learned how to speak better English.” The sailors taught the Hessians about their current environment and America, their future one, which gave the Hessians the ability to understand what the world around them. The sailors, once more adopting the role of the expert teacher, also taught them the language necessary to interact with people in both of these new environments. In this case the Hessians were beginning their lessons completely ignorant: Johannes mentions that he and his Hessian comrades learned “better English,” rather than just “English.”

No other journal of a non-officer mentions learning English, or any previous experience with this language, but the lack of writing on the subject allows reasoned speculation. Given that there was an information exchange between the two groups on subjects as varied as the current or future environment, what animals were called, or what the geographic location was, there must have been some common language. The sailors’ proficiency in German, although notably present, was likely not enough to fully describe the intricacies of a Portuguese man-of-war, and that information was somehow transferred from the sailors to the soldiers. It is possible that all information was communicated through a few translators, but it is more probable that the Hessians, as Johannes notes, used this opportunity to improve their English knowing that they were going to an English-speaking land; preparing for later greater autonomy.

Not all experiences needed language, though. Activities such as watching the sun set, whales breach, or porpoises swim through the waves behind the ship needed no

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63 Cited in: Rediker, *Deep Blue Sea*, p 162. For a detailed discussion of maritime language, see pages 162-196 of this book.
translation. If the Hessian soldiers and the sailors managed to find time during the hectic life on board the ship, they could merely observe events without needing to talk them through. The two groups could amuse themselves through specifically maritime entertainment: “Within our sight we threw an empty bottle, from our wine cellar, overboard. At the same time the captain allowed one of his cabin boys to jump into the sea. He had to swim a rather great distance but brought our bottle back to the ship in his mouth.”¹⁶⁵ Through these non-verbal amusements, in this case a feat of strength, the two groups collaborated for their own enjoyment. It was good for these Hessians in particular to celebrate a cabin boy’s strength, as relationships between the cabin boys and the Hessians had been tenuous after the cabin boys had been caught stealing pipes, knives, and other small items from the soldiers.⁶⁶ Activities like this feat of strength brought the Hessians and the sailors together.

A SYMBOLIC RITUAL

The sailors held a christening today for those who had not previously been to America. They put blindfolds on them, used fat and lampblack to blacken their faces, and then those with black faces were shaved so closely with a wood rasp that afterwards the blood flowed. Next they were dunked in barrels of water as if being baptized.⁶⁷

One element of this event was common among sailors’ rituals: being dunked under the water when crossing the Equator for the first time, although that usually involved holding

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⁶⁴ Burgoyne, Reuber, p 16. [4 August 1776]
⁶⁵ Burgoyne, Anonymous, p 18. [27th April, 1777]
⁶⁶ “The ship’s cabin boys had gradually stolen tobacco pipes, knives, and all sorts of small items from the soldiers. As that was discovered today, the captain tied them by the hands and feet over the cannons and then with a small sort of whip made from strips, they were punished on their bare bottoms.” Ibid., p 17. [18th April, 1777]
⁶⁷ Burgoyne, Rueffer of Milsungen, p 24-5. [16 July 1776]
onto a rope while being cast off the ship.\textsuperscript{68} Everything else in the ritual, however, was likely created specifically for these Hessians. This ritual was complex and symbolic, and its symbolism can be interpreted with the luxury of hindsight, although it is uncertain whether the following observations were apparent at that time. First, the image of the sailors leading blindfolded Hessians calls to mind the lack of the control the soldiers had over their fate. Just as they were being blindly led through this ritual, so were they led over the seas and into battle.

Next, the sailors put them in blackface; the sailors were comparing the Hessians to slaves, which was not uncommon. Many Americans called the Hessians slaves, or captives, in order to emphasize the Hessians’ lack of agency in their society. The Hessians may have thought the same, although they do not mention it in their journals. By making a connection between Hessians and slaves, the sailors were again referring to the Hessians’ lack of power, and their forced obedience to their officers who, notably, did not participate in this ritual. The sailors were also inherently comparing their ship to a slave ship; the slave trade dominated the shipping industry to America, and given the sailors’ propensity to change ships, they had likely worked on a slave ship before. With hindsight, one can make a further connection between slave ships and the ships taking the Hessians to America: the Middle Passage.

The Middle Passage refers to the shipment of enslaved Africans from the west coast of Africa to South/Central, and later North America. It brings to mind the image of a group of enslaved Africans, unable to speak the language around them, in a society with which they cannot fully interact. The importance of the Middle Passage to the slavers was its ability, through sudden and intense dislocation, to remove the enslaved Africans’ ties

\textsuperscript{68} Rediker, \textit{Deep Blue Sea}, p 187.
to their home, and aid in a removal of their identity and agency. The Hessians also
experienced, under less violence and stress, a Middle Passage. The ship was a foreign
space, and the journey a transformative experience that mimicked the Hessians’ future
experiences in America. The Hessians encountered the foreign on the ship, and as a result
were forced to reevaluate their identities to understand why they were different from the
sailors. Similarly, any attempt to recreate a homey environment required an
understanding of how they viewed their home and what aspects of their identity as
“Hessian” they subscribed to, or wished to change. They were also forced to come to
terms with their lack of knowledge and agency within this new environment.

The sailors, after covering the Hessians’ faces with fat and lampblack, proceeded to
shave their faces with a wood rasp, a long flat strip of metal with sharp teeth, until “the
blood flowed”. This purification process was violent, highlighting the nature of the
journey to America: being plunged suddenly into a world where one could understand
neither the language being spoken nor the environment around oneself was a violent
change, which produced in an aspiring sailor the feeling that he was living in a dream,
and for a Hessian must have been even more disconcerting. The violence of this ritual
must have provoked strong reactions from the soldiers, but strangely, the Hessian officer
observing the ritual does not note any reactions from himself or from the Hessians
experiencing it.

Their silence allows us to speculate on what their reactions might have been. It is
possible that the Hessians were amused by this ritual, that, like wrestling for a bit of good
fun, the soldiers, although yelling and blustering, laughed at this test of their manliness
and afterwards felt as though they were initiated into a group of sea-worthy individuals,
finally prepared to set foot on America. The officers observing this may have thought it was merely some common folk’s fun, and not thought further about its implications. However, it is possible that the captain of the ship, the sailors, and the Hessians drew some of the same connections that have been drawn in this analysis. But if so, they are not mentioned.

REVOLUTIONARY INFLUENCES

Disrespect of authority was more likely on board the ship, since one of the vital aspects of any sailor’s life was anti-authoritarianism. This was the result of “the violent, personal, and arbitrary nature of the authority possessed and the discipline dispensed by the merchant captain or his mate.”69 The captain and his mate had absolute authority over the sailors while they were on board the ship, so it was only through constant fighting for his rights that a sailor was able to stop potential despotism. The tools the sailors had to preserve their rights were: work stoppage (essentially a strike) which normally occurred when the ship was resting in the harbor, where the sailors insisted their work regimen be relaxed; desertion, which was risky, but easy, as the sailors were allowed to roam the city and to simply not come back to the ship was a simple solution if the captain was despotic; suing for rights or pay in a court of law.70 The sailors did not shy away from using any of these tools, which were always less effective but less dangerous than outright mutiny, in order to firmly demarcate the captain’s power. Day to day, the sailors relied on verbal

69 Rediker, Deep Blue Sea, p 244.
70 Rediker, Deep Blue Sea, pp 98-100 (work stoppage); pp 52, 100-106 (desertion); pp 56 (suing).
mutiny, such as cursing at the captain, in order to assert their own independence and the limits of the captain’s authority.\textsuperscript{71}

In contrast, the Hessians were as soldiers trained to respect utterly their superior’s authority, in order to prevent their own death while in battle. It must have been disconcerting to experience a form of hierarchy defied by those who were disadvantaged by it. Watching the sailors defy what they thought were unjust orders from the Captain may have changed the Hessian’s understandings of what authority was. During the voyage, the Hessians and the sailors together engaged in actions which were directly defiant of authority. “The sailors are becoming more trustful of us soldiers because many of us drink no rum, which can be traded to the sailors for bread. However, the captain and the mate should not see this. It must be done secretly.”\textsuperscript{72} Presumably, the Hessian officers were also kept unaware of such transgressive transactions.

Through such actions, the Hessians subverted authority; this was encouraged by the sailors, who wanted as much rum as they could get. Experiences such as these, although not explicitly noted in journals, were no doubt universal to the Hessian experience aboard the ship. The sailors’ ability to influence the Hessians was great. The sailors open fights against authority could be linked to the high number of Hessian desertions; the Hessian deserted his army, once in America, in the same way the sailor deserted his ship.

The journey to America was an influential time for the Hessian soldiers. Some sought to recreate the familiar and comfortable in food. Interaction with foreign objects and people forced the Hessians to examine their own identity, think about what was important to

\textsuperscript{71} Rediker, \textit{Deep Blue Sea}, pp 165-6.
\textsuperscript{72} Burgoyne, \textit{Reuber}, p 11. [9th June, 1776]
them, and most importantly, understand their relationships to these foreign objects and each other. The way a Hessian soldier dealt with situations involving the foreign while journeying to America helped to form the way he dealt with the foreign once on land. The unfamiliar space of the ship as well as those people who worked on it shaped the Hessians first preconceptions of the land onto which they would debark. The sailors taught them English, allowing the soldiers to interact with their environment, and informed their preconceptions of what America was like, and who the Americans were. Through their actions, the sailors showed the Hessians the limits of authority, and ways to subvert it, influencing them to explore greater autonomy. This time was entirely unique, and all Hessians experienced it, thus, the Hessian experience of America must be understood in the context of their experience of the journey over; their first introduction to the foreign.
CHAPTER TWO

HESSIANS’ IMPRESSIONS OF AMERICA:

Were we able to eavesdrop on the Hessian troops shortly after their arrival in America, we may have heard a conversation like this:

PLATTE GRENADIER 1: It is doubtful that Columbus could have had greater joy upon catching his first glimpse of the New World, than we had. At once everyone seemed to come alive.

PLATTE GRENADIER 2: How refreshing a moment that was. But how quickly it passed, for me, at least.

GRENADIER 1: Why, though? Everyone cheered so long; expelling air that rolled over land and fresh water.

GRENADIER 2: I mean, unlike Columbus, we knew where we were going to end up; or I did. I mean, we’re right goddamn here, brother. Right goddamn here.

   With you, and them, and them, and us.73

GRENADIER 3: As we got on that sloop for the last bit of the sea journey I looked around, looking for some comfort of shared experience, but everybody was looking at their own hands, salted from months at sea. Like they could see in the cracked salt everything at sea; storms and boredom and big fish and turtles and drowning people and vomit drinking water and not enough food or alcohol and sailor’s tales and cracking chests and broken bones.

That day we got on that tiny boat which bumped from the ship to the mainland we lost our god. We had feared the sea and everything it did: if it was still we mourned its stillness, and if it moved we feared a storm. We were powerless on that ship, locked underneath the hold when our god raged; we could see nothing; the noise of wood snapping against wood and animals lowing and pissing themselves of fright. Those animals kept us human; because they pissed themselves we didn’t. We just held on tight to our beds, and down and up we went, until it was over. Now we have nothing to hold onto but our guns, which aren’t bigger than us. We are gods now, killing as we learned; our enemy isn’t bigger than us, it is the same size as us, and mortal. We can reveal its blood, which is also salty.

On that bumping boat I sunk into a deep sadness, like you, my brothers. The world is bigger now, much bigger than I can see. And most of the people in this world hate us. We can stab, and gore, and beat, in the name of money.74

You = the other Grenadier; them = the British; them = the Americans; us = the Hessians.
After spending months on board their creaky wooden ship, the Hessians had habituated their life: through conversations with sailors, they had informed themselves about their world to the point where they felt comfortable with ship-speak and taking on nautical responsibilities when necessary. They had made the foreign world of the ship their own and had made clear their role within it; but suddenly they were forced to leave that domain behind for a new, unknown land, where they would again have to struggle to gain autonomy. The Hessians set foot in a rockier, smaller, boat and mourned the loss of the ship just as they had mourned the loss of Germany so many months before. The dialogue continues:

**GRENADIER 1:** When I stepped onto the land, wetting my boots in the ocean one last time and in the mud for the first time a while, I saw destruction wrought. To New York City the fire had come, burning, burning, burning; everything was burned before I got there. I saw heaps of burnt wood and charred stone on the west side of the city; there are burn marks on the wall outside this bar, and I assume that America does not all smell of ashes. There is beauty, though, in the ashes; not a phoenix’s beauty rising from the ashes, but the beauty of words, which endures through time and change and destruction. The houses are more beautiful than those in my hometown, and of a different style. Even the ruined furnishings are finer than those in the farms of our hometown.

**GRENADIER 2:** And all the houses, empty. The people, vanished.

**CONFLICT OF DESIRES**

This conversation could have included Steuernagel:

**QUARTERMASTER SERGEANT STEUERNAGEL:** I could feel even from the ship a radiance of freedom from those who lived here, and since I’ve been on land the feeling’s

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strengthened; are we to rob them of this freedom? The oppression of the war which we, the German slaves, will wage, will strip the Americans of their fool’s paradise; are we to take away the harmony between neighbors, the lack of beggars, the feeling of shelter which every plantation and every farm radiates, in short, everything which makes this New World seem a blessed land compared to our home? The land, which poor and needy Europeans make worthwhile, those people who value love, truth, faith, and freedom of speech, will have their ways and welfare through war undone. And we are the undoing.

Steuernagel’s conflicted sentiments, uttered shortly after landing in America, are a driving theme throughout the Hessian journals. A conflict of interest between doing one’s job and yet sympathizing with American ideology started to divide the Hessian identity into two parts: soldier, and human. Or perhaps it is better visualized as an outer and inner self: the outer soldiering self conflicting the inner self’s desire for freedom and individuality, which the Hessians were trying to take away from the Americans whenever they acted as commanded. However, there were a few spaces in which the inner human self could almost entirely erase the outer soldier self.

The first was the journal: a private space where one’s own thoughts could be expressed without any repercussions. The journal was a liberating space for a Hessian who didn’t get to articulate his inner desires as he could rant and rave, mourn, and express emotions, all without repercussion.

The second space was being a prisoner. Although it seems unintuitive, the Hessians actually had a large amount of freedom while prisoners: they could work, explore the area, go to church, and interact with the locals. They were allowed this freedom largely because they were considered to be autonomous. Although the residents of the town

76 [Fiction] Burgoyne, *Enemy Views*, p 53. [Steuernagel, of the Waldeck Regiment; 13 October 1776]
77 The Hessians considered themselves to be free soldiers, and rejected some impositions, particularly having to pay a 80 Spanish dollar fine to leave their captivity: “Ist uns auch noch nicht zum Vergeß kommen, wofür wir gekommen und was Beruf uns in dieses Land geführet [...] als freye Soldaten.” Abschrift des Briefes der Gefangenen aus Philadelphia vom 28.7.1782 an Oberst von Borck, Relationes Loßberg, f. 39. Found in: Daniel Krebs, *German Captives in the War of Independence*. 
where the camps were located initially saw only the Hessians’ as enemy soldiers, personal interactions with the Hessians introduced them to the Hessians’ human selves.

While in America, the Hessians expressed their individuality ever more; a process which for many of them was so attractive that they stayed in America, preferring not to return to a land in which their identity was singular and predetermined. Hessians were content to lay quiet and wait until they were exchanged or the war ended, as this state of being was just as preferable, if not more, than being soldiers: they were still paid, their meals still provided, except, instead of fighting they were able to explore the cities, make friends with the people, and experience the community around them. As prisoners of war, they had, contrary to what one might think, a greater amount of autonomy than while fighting for the British, as interacting with America provoked self-questioning, particularly of obligations, which is part of the process of gaining autonomy; to then have limited freedom of movement within the American society allowed the Hessians to practice autonomy in interactions with Americans.

A DIVISIVE FIGHT

The summer’s middle brought its heat, and those prisoners not working on farms sat in the barracks at Lancaster, and sweated days away. Hessians and British prisoners were intermingled, speaking as often as was pleasurable; those who were bilingual were naturally more sympathetic. Although it was hot like every other day, although one pound of bread and one pound of meat was allotted like every other day, although the space inside the barracks stayed as dusty as every other day, today was a day which inspired those whose blood flowed red through their veins and jacket threads: it was the birthday of King George III.

The British soldiers gathered firewood from their supply and built a blazing bonfire in the middle of the barracks, around which to drink and sing and shout.

The fifteen American guards glanced slanted at the British blaze, watching men stumble almost into fire, lifting drained bottles in the air, singing, shouting; the air felt a riot. American guards accosted British soldiers and the latter,
brazened by drink and patriotism, refused to desist. American guards drew their weapons, and British soldiers tottered, then attacked, and overcame the fifteen men; they broke their weapons in a fit, and threw them in the fire.

The Hessians sat idly by, watching without outward interest; inside, they were thrilling: what a play to be enacted!

American guards ran away, the British cheered, watching enemy weapons burn, toasting their own healthy British fortitude, making the silent barracks loud again.

How long did they wait before the repercussion came? Did their singing lull, the barracks growing quieter as they watched flames lick round gunmetal? Or were they drunk enough to be surprised when

Four hundred and eight men with
Two cannons marched through the door, lined themselves up, and fired neatly upon the British rebels?

Some fell dead immediately, others, screaming, dragged themselves to cower behind brick walls. Surrender was quick, their spirits devastated.

The Hessians watched it all without interaction.

As the hours passed and the blood was dusted over with the ashes from the fire, there came a clear divide: those who were locked up and those who weren’t. The Hessians wandered around the barracks, the British soldiers grudging them their freedom. The Hessians murmured: I wouldn’t want to be mixed up in that affair. Let’s just lay quiet and keep our heads.

As the days passed and the British soldiers were released, there came a clear divide: those who could explore the town and those who couldn’t; those who got more bread and meat and those who didn’t. The Hessians wandered around the town, the British soldiers grudging them their freedom.

Hessians murmured: Why would we have been involved? I don’t care for King George, myself. I have no allegiance to the crown, or to this goddamn country here. I’ll just lay quiet and keep my head, ‘til I go home again. \(^78\)

The Hessians exercised their autonomy in this story by examining their obligations to those around them, then deciding they had no imperative to act. These Hessians did not align themselves with the British or the Americans, choosing instead their own path; the story above is a good metaphor for most Hessian-British-American relations. But not only is it a good metaphor for direct relations, it is also a good metaphor for the Hessian experience of autonomy as a whole: the more autonomy the Hessians took, the more autonomy they got; in the above story they decided to act autonomously, and were
rewarded for their (lack of) actions with freedom, which in turn allowed them more opportunities to interact with Americans, prompting more self-examination.

RUMOR

REUBER: As we [Hessian prisoners of war] neared the city [of Philadelphia], all the people left the giant city, big and small, old and young, and assembled to see what kind of men we were. When we came face to face so that they could see us, they looked directly at us. The old women who were present screamed and scolded at us in a terrible manner and wanted to strangle us because we had come to America to steal their freedom. Others, despite all the scolding, brought cognac and bread and wanted to give it to us. But the most violent were the old women who still wanted to strangle us. The American guard which escorted us had orders from General Washington to lead us through the entire city so that we could be seen by everyone in the city.

However, because the people were so angry and so threatening toward us and nearly over-powered the guard, and we were just then at the barracks, our commander said to us, ‘Dear Hessians, we will march into the barracks.’ They were built with three wings, and for our safety we Hessians had to march into the barracks at once and the entire American escort had to control the angry people. Then General Washington had a broadside posted in the city and surrounding countryside that we were innocent people in this war and were not volunteers, but forced into the war. They should not treat us as enemies but accept and treat the Germans as friends. ‘And because General Washington had given his word of honor’ conditions improved for us. Old, young, rich and poor, and all treated us in a friendly manner and each day we received one pound of bread and meat, and we lay quiet.79

The shift in the interactions between the Hessians and the society within which they were living was rapid and dramatic. One day old women were threatening to strangle them, the next everyone was welcoming them into their community; this sudden shift caused by the intervention of George Washington into Hessian-American relations. In most cases, the Hessians were accepted because a third party shifted the dialogue from that between a person and a soldier to that between two people. This was done through the use of

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78 [Fiction] Burgoyne, Reuber, p 27. [12 January, 1777]
familiar ideology: first, the Hessians are portrayed as unwilling participants in the war; they become “innocent” because the war was not their idea. Their status as unwilling participants both accepts lower-ranking soldiers and demonizes the higher-ranking ones; since the grunt labor cannot be blamed for either causing the war or autonomous action, any actions they performed as soldiers are not really their fault. This lack of responsibility helped the lower-ranking Hessians shed their soldier-identity.

This process of being accepted seems to argue directly against the idea of Hessian autonomy: if the Hessians needed a mediator to initially access American society, doesn’t that mean they had no autonomy? It is true, the idea that Hessians were completely autonomous is flawed: they were always restricted by those commanding them or holding them captive. Hessian autonomy must be understood within that context. That being said, Hessians, in many cases, changed the American biases against them; this illustrates their social agency and desire to be as autonomous as possible within the given restrictions.

Finally they cast lots, and luck chose a man, advanced in years, to host both Wasmus and Pastor Melsheimer. Wasmus was present at the lottery, and so went with his future host, a barbarous man who looked at Wasmus up and down through wide open nostrils. They walked to the Brigadier General's house to call for Pastor Melsheimer. Whilst there, the Brigadier General's father and mother, sweet old worriers, spoke with the host, urging him to treat the Hessians well since they were good people, and Christians. He grunted in reply.

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80 Hessians were not always autonomous while in America; this will also be discussed later in the context of Hessian soldiers needing guides in order to navigate America.
81 Although in the latter case, American officials encouraged Hessians to integrate themselves into American society, hoping to convince them that deserting the British army and joining the American would be a better plan for their future than simply returning to their homeland.
82 Remember the sailors? Hessians inverting hierarchical structures will be discussed later in the context of Hessian interactions with enslaved people.
BRIGADIER GENERAL’S FATHER: Just like our son, they have been compelled to fight. They left their country, and their families, which they surely did not do willingly.

BRIGADIER GENERAL’S MOTHER: You must consider how unhappy they are to be prisoners. Through your kindness and welcoming, you can make their horrible state easier to bear. God will reward you, sir.

FATHER: That he will.

MOTHER: And your family with blessings.

There was grunting in assent all around, and the three set off for their changed home.

They approached the door, around which firelight glowed.

HOST: Now come inside, and set your bags just there. Yes, yes, that’s fine. This is my wife, and here—

His welcome speech was cut off by the terrified screaming of a frightened little girl. She hid behind her mother's skirts and screamed, while, embarrassed, mother and father tried to calm her down. The Hessians shuffled, taking off their hats, setting down their bags, and tried to fade into the walls.

WASMUS: Why ist she so scared, my sir, what can we do, to make her sicher feel?

Pastor Melsheimer: Do not be frightened, my child, we are but friendly prisoners, and I a man of God.

HOST (embarrassed): Well, people have been saying some things about you and your kind which may have frightened her.

WASMUS: What things? Our kind?

HOST: Well, people have been saying that you were cannibals, and savages from Germany, among other things. Of course, we didn't believe a word of it ourselves, my wife and I, but you know how children can be when they get ideas in their heads.

PASTOR MELSHEIMER (stooping down): Oh yes, of course. But you have no cause to be alarmed, my dear. Look at this lovely hat we've brought you, here.

He grabbed Wasmus' hat, who relinquished it with a puzzled look, and offered it the girl. They smiled, crouching down, and holding out the colored hat. The girl hid behind her mother's skirts, her tiny thumb now stoppering her screams. They put the hat down, and backed away, sitting at the table; they answered rote questions with rote answers, stopping whenever they could to make a friendship with the little girl.

She kissed them on the cheek before she went to bed. 83

The Hessians had to battle constantly with rumors spread about them; they quite often encountered intense hatred when first meeting various societies as prisoners, but occasionally they encountered more bemusing and comical situations. Although in the
moment terrifying a little girl just by existing was probably frustrating and depressing (considering these Hessians had likely encountered such situations before, and were hoping to be able to escape such dehumanizing rumors through personal interactions; also because when entering someone’s house for the first time, one always wants to make a good impression and the terrified screams of a little girl tend to upset a hospitable mood), in retrospect the story can be read as funny. Lieutenant Piel might agree, for he notes:

The rumor quickly spread [around Charlestown, Maryland] that the captured Hessian officers were in the ferry house. This drew a lot of unpleasant visitors to us. There was no gentleman in the entire region who did not come riding to see the Hessians, about whom he had heard so many stories. They had come to see strange animals and found to their disgust that we looked like human beings.

It seemed comical, but it is true, that they had formed such an idea of the Hessians, but in the beginning they would not believe our words that we were really Hessians.₇⁴  

Rumors about the Hessians were so widely propagated, and so thoroughly believed, that the people who came to see the Hessians did not believe they were the Hessians, even when the Hessians themselves said that they were. Rumors apparently had a very strong effect on the American populace (even those who weren’t young girls), especially when it came to the Hessians being described as animals, or savage men. Or take this more violent rumor:

When they [the residents of Rhode Island] saw us and saw our fleet enter, there was a great outcry and they fled to Providence with bag and baggage. But something terrible happened. They ran about in the streets telling one another their opinion, because they had heard such tales about us, that we were not human, we plundered everyone, and burned and killed everything and everyone in

₇₃ [Fiction] Helgadob, Wasmus. [22 September, 1777]
₇₄ Burgoyne, Enemy Views, p 128. [Lieutenant Piel; 9 January 1777]
our path. Therefore, these rebels were happy to run from us even in their great fear.\textsuperscript{85}

Confronting such rumors about them forced the Hessians to examine themselves: why are these rumors propagated and believed? What is it about us that makes this possible?

The Hessians were largely unknown to the Americans, unlike every other force involved in the American Revolution. Certain people who had been following the Philadelphia newspapers would have seen several mentions of the Hessians beginning in 1730\textsuperscript{86}, but it is unlikely that any American had any personal experience of the Hessians before they arrived in 1776. This meant that the American definition of the Hessians was flexible, and could, indeed was, changed by the Hessians themselves.

Changing rumors about oneself required a strong sense of self. While interacting with Americans, Hessians would have had to decide whether they agreed with the British or the American ideology, which led to a questioning of their relationship to their home society and government. The Hessians could explore their autonomy if they desired, but in interactions with Americans, particularly once they were prisoners, the process of questioning that inevitably led to engaging with autonomy was forced upon them. Some of them may have been unwilling participants in conversations that forced them to question themselves, as realizing that the patriotic, social, and personal ties one has are no longer strictly relevant to experiencing a new society can be not only disconcerting but also frightening.

Others thrived under American influences, yet others were merely affected by them. Below, one can see the effects such influences had upon a Chaplain; they caused him to

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, p 107. [Asteroth, 7 December 1776]
reframe his perception of the military power structure in the rhetoric of the American Revolution.

**Chaplain Waldeck:** The soldiers work like the Israelites in Egypt, they go from watch to fatigue duty, and this happens every single day. The soldier’s life is really one of slavery.  

What was already a powerful statement was made more powerful because a man learned in the Bible said it. The Israelites originally came into Egypt from their drought-ridden homeland as a powerful people; one of their own, Joseph, was, to use a modern term, the Prime Minister of Egypt. They became so multitudinous and mighty that another Pharaoh feared them, and forced them into slavery. Despite the oppression, the Israelites continued to multiply until slavery turned into genocide; the Pharaoh attempted to kill all first-born sons. God subsequently rescued the seed of Abraham from their slavery, helped Moses part the sea, and delivered the promised people. Chaplain Waldeck said that the Hessians are the Israelites, so their Princes, who forced them into this slavery, would be the Egyptians, and America, the land across the sea, would be the promised land (the last interpretation is more tenuous, as the Hessians were slaves in the new land as well). Such a statement shows a strong ideological rejection of the society from which Chaplain Waldeck came; such a rejection could only have come by travelling to another land, in this case, America.

Second, the Hessians are likened to slaves, the denotative meaning of which is similar to calling them unwilling participants in the war; the connotative meaning of which

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87 Burgoyne, *Enemy Views*, p 404. [Chaplain Waldeck; 3-7 January 1780]
integrate them into the contemporary revolutionary ideology. “Slavery” was a term often used in the American revolutionary rhetoric,\(^{88}\) so by likening the Hessians’ relationship with their prince to the revolutionaries’ former relationship with their King, the Hessians and the revolutionaries could find a common cause. This common cause was probably the reason Hessians deserted during or after the war; they saw what a society without a monarch was like: in contrast to their own, which was micro-managed by the monarchic government, the American society didn’t even have a government yet, and the one to come would not impinge upon the Hessians’ autonomy.

**PLUNDER**

The Hessians composed a part of the van-guard, and following in the rear of the British grenadiers – their looks to me were terrific – their brass caps – their mustaches – their countenances by nature morose, and their music, that sounded better English than they themselves could speak – plunder – plunder – plunder – gave a desponding, heart-breaking effect, as I thought to all; to me it was dreadful beyond expression.\(^{89}\)

What the Americans called plundering the Hessians called scavenging: going into any empty or almost empty house and taking whatever was useful. This was not without its consequences, as these soldiers note:

There is a shortage of provisions and food which can be bought. The inhabitants bring us nothing and the rations are the worst imaginable. On their faces the

\(^{88}\) John Locke influenced American revolutionary rhetoric, particularly on the subject of government’s relation to their citizens in terms of a master-slave relationship. “[N]o body can desire to have me in his absolute power, unless it be to compel me by force to that which is against the right of my freedom, i.e. make me a slave. To be free from such force is the only security of my preservation; and reason bids me look on him, as an enemy to my preservation, who would take away that freedom which is the fence to it; so that he who makes an attempt to enslave me, thereby puts himself into a state of war with me.”


malice and hatred toward us can be seen. We are not allowed to take the least thing here in the province nor to do anything to them. This only increases their evil the more, and therefore we have to be more careful of the farmers than the enemy soldiers...\textsuperscript{90}

Despite threats of punishment, plundering was common in the Hessian, and indeed in any, army. This was in part because the punishments for plundering were so severe – hanging, or running the gauntlet – that the manpower of the army would be quickly diminished if all plundering were punished. Additionally, the Hessians considered plundering to be a part of war. Although the British often considered Hessian plundering shameful, they were guilty of it as well, as was every party involved in the American Revolution. In certain cases, such as the scenario above, plundering might even have been deemed necessary, even though it would have caused bad relations with the locals.

Bad relations were a major British concern: Ambrose Serle, a contemporary journaler, writes that it would have been better: “if the Rebellion could have been reduced without any foreign troops at all, for I fear our Employment of these upon this service will tend to irritate and inflame the Americans [...] It is a misfortune we ever had such a set of dirty, cowardly set of contemptible miscreants [as the Hessians.]”\textsuperscript{91} This sentiment was mutual, as the Hessians blamed the British for plundering, claiming in many cases that by the time they had got there, the plundering was all done. Nevertheless, some Hessians disapproved of any plundering:

This war has divided me from those whom I thought were my friends; I listen to orders where others do not. I have no wish to be cruel, whereas others take joy in cruelty. Just today, despite the strictest orders many houses were burned down over the inhabitants head. I could not look away from the horror. Other houses were plundered, and everything taken. I watched, but how could I separate

\textsuperscript{90} Burgoyne, \textit{Enemy Views}, p 231-2. [Hesse-Cassel Jaeger Corps Journal, 30 October 1777]

\textsuperscript{91} Atwood, \textit{The Hessians}, p 178.
myself, in the same uniform, with the same weapons, from those who were wreaking senseless destruction? I stood by, but am hated still by those who see me as they see my fellow soldiers. I cannot stand such cruelty; but as a soldier, I am a tool just like the other tools; fire is a tool, guns are tools, a soldier’s barbaric hands are tools. And barbaric hands have much to do here; those who take pleasure in such cruelties may take satisfaction to their fullest, as there are ample opportunities to do so.  

LIMITS OF PLUNDERING THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

Found: Potatoes, squash, beets, and an ample supply of cider.
We know how to use these things.
Found: Apples, wholesome potatoes, three negroes.
We do not know how to communicate with them, or they with us.  

Plundering was only a useful activity if the acquired goods were themselves useful. Potatoes, squash, beets, and cider are goods, said some Hessians, which we know how to use; in other words, they were familiar goods. These could be used to make familiar foods, which was important for the Hessians’ sense of autonomy and home while in America. A complaint, on the other hand, about food they do not know how to use, does the opposite. Due to their limited knowledge of the American Landscape, they had to rely on familiarity or a guide to lead them through it culinarily, physically, societally, etc.

American Landscape, here, means a vast array of objects which were geographically and culturally located in the area for which the Continental Army, from 1775-1783, was fighting. This term does not exclude any individual culture or object, but encompasses all of it: Indigenous residents, residents with colonial backgrounds, forests, bears, corn,

92 [Fiction] Burgoyne, Feilitzsch, p 22. [20 December, 1777]
sweet potatoes, cities, states, funerals, weapons, parties, societies, bars, inns, and so on. There were inherent qualities to these objects that made them unique and, therefore, gaining useful knowledge about any of these objects required (and continues to require) either education or a guide. The Hessians’ knowledge about what could be called a German Landscape does not, for the most part, apply to the American landscape. This lack of knowledge can be as they deem the potatoes, squash, and cider, “useful”: calling certain objects useful implies that there are others that are not. What the Hessians are truly saying when they judge an object to be useful is: my knowledge about this object is useful, and, by implication, I am useful, I have autonomy.

This brings up another aspect of the Hessian experience: their sense of self-worth. It was radically diminished when they could not apply their knowledge to their surroundings. The Hessian whose knowledge is not applicable is without autonomy and self-worth. Requiring a guide, and the subsequent feeling of dependence on another likely led to a lot of the depression which the soldiers felt, and motivated them to express autonomy through cruelty to prisoners, or plundering the American landscape. The latter is literally forcing Hessian power, and subsequently Hessian self-worth and autonomy (I can take this because I have power and autonomy), onto the otherwise formidable American landscape.

There were times when the Hessians made grave mistakes about their knowledge of the American Landscape; this instance led to the death of a man:

13 men of Captain von Stain’s Company dug up some cicuta roots, or schirling, as well as some herbs, cooked, and ate them. The schirling bears a remarkable resemblance to the parsnip due to its clumps of white tuberous roots, but is incredibly poisonous; common symptoms are nausea, abdominal pain, shaking, and vomiting. Unfortunately these men were unable to tell the difference, and
ingested more than enough to kill them. After eating, all became deathly sick, and some could no longer hear or see. Milk and liquids were administered as quickly as possible to make them vomit which worked for twelve men. The unlucky thirteenth man, Private Auernheimer, could not be made to vomit and died forty-five minutes after ingestion.\textsuperscript{94}

GUIDES

There were other instances when a lack of knowledge of the American landscape resulted in Hessian impotence via a reversal of ordinary power structures:

The army departed Turkeypoint [MD] and marched to Elkton (MD) which had been deserted by all inhabitants. We had no reports about the enemy, and no maps of the interior of this land, and no one in the army was familiar with this area. After we had passed the city, no one knew which way to go. Therefore, men were sent out in all directions until finally a negro was found, and the army had to march according to his directions. This negro knew nothing about the enemy army himself, but said that a corps of the same was reported to be in the area.\textsuperscript{95}

It can be tenuously inferred that Hessian soldiers were generally not racist towards blacks [discussed later]; however, it must have been disconcerting to take orders from a black man, as it was an inversion of the power dynamic so present in America at the time. This example also highlights the Hessians’ complete inability to navigate America without the help of a guide.

\textsuperscript{94} Bruce E. Burgoyne, trans., \textit{An Ansbach-Bayreuth Diary}, (1989), p 33. [8 April 1779]
\textsuperscript{95} Bruce E. Burgoyne, trans., \textit{Journal kept by the Distinguished Hessian Field Jaeger Corps during the Campaigns of the Royal Army of Great Britain in North America}, p 11. [Aug 28 1777]
The Hessians were unable to proceed until they found someone who can guide them: in this case, a black man. The description of the finding of this man is confusingly worded: “until finally a negro was found”. Was the black man the only person they could find, or were the Hessians searching specifically for a black man, and it took a long time to find one? If the latter, perhaps the Hessians saw in the color of the man’s skin a symbol of trustworthiness; given that any enslaved individual who joined or helped the British army would be freed or rewarded, it was more likely that a black man would be on your side than a white man, who could be a rebel posing as a friend in order to lure you into an ambush.

As these stories show, the Hessians were not always autonomous agents in America; in fact, sometimes they were decidedly without agency. In the two stories above, the Hessians lack autonomy in America when they would have full autonomy in their homelands; finding food and walking through the countryside would be second nature to farmers in the western Holy Roman Empire. Although being in America gave the Hessians autonomy they would not have at home, it is important to note the ways in which autonomy was taken away from the Hessians: interacting with nature and language were the main ways Hessians were reminded of their lack of agency. Interactions with nature and language could be understood as a gauntlet for the Hessians: those who emerged not too shaken up would perhaps stay, and those who could not hack it would go back to their home.

THE ENSLAVED
Interactions with enslaved people often revealed the Hessians’ views on authority. Wiederhold’s description of an incident involving an enslaved woman humanizes enslaved people and disparages the American’s treatment of them:

I must make another observation about the Negroes, about whom it can be seen how little the people care about them, how blindly they are led, and how they are held back from all knowledge of God and His word, so that they believe they are of a lower class than we are, and were made to be slaves. Proof of this is the following:

A Negress by the name of Kitty in Lieutenant Sobbe’s quarters in Dumfries once asked the mentioned lieutenant, when she was alone with him, with these obviously sorrowfully said words. The daughter in the house had said to her that the God who had made us white people could not have made Negroes. They were made by another god and belonged to him, and had no connection to our God. Could that be true? Lieutenant Sobbe said simply that this could not be true as there was only one God, who had not only made us but her and everything in the world, and if they believed in Him, prayed to Him, and lived a good life on earth, then after her death she would enter the holy community and possibly have a better fate than her masters who were white might have. She was very happy about that departed from him in a joyous mood. It can be seen by this that the Negroes naturally have a sentimental heart and not one of us would doubt but that the Negroes all have a better character than the whites, even though this appears as if it were not so.

The excessive mishandling regarding all life’s necessities, and the conviction that they are slaves from an evil nation, made them sad and dull. It is a shame on all humanity how barbaric some people treat them, and it causes [me to] shudder to see [how] the Americans, even when they wish to be gentle and hospitable, understand nothing about them. Many of them, male as well as female, from twelve to sixteen years old, must go about naked, even when waiting on the table. As everything in the local climate ripens early, there is no doubt that this has an influence on the human body and develops everything earlier than would happen in Germany. The blacks do not consider this bad because it has become natural for them and they have nothing with which to cover themselves because their masters give them nothing, and just as they work naked in rain, front, and heat, so they sleep during the night on the bare floor. Animals are treated better in Germany. If the blacks were taught science, many would excel more than whites because they are not only eager to learn but also have intelligence.  

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96 Bruce E. Burgoyne, trans., *Diary of an Electoral Hesse Officer (Andreas Wiederhold), from 7 October 1776 to 7 December 1780.* (1994) pp. 45-6.
This story tells of three anti-authoritarian acts: first, there is the act of writing and potentially publishing such a story with such strong anti-slavery sentiments; second, there is the critique of American slavery practices itself; third, there are the Hessians’ actions against the institution of slavery.

The details of Wiederhold’s critiques and the ideas he uses to critique slavery were not common in America at the time. Wiederhold begins by suggesting not only that the enslaved persons are not inferior to the whites, but also that the only reason they believe they are is psychological manipulation enacted through preventing them from knowledge of Christianity. Wiederhold writes that this psychological manipulation alters their very being; the sadness and dullness of the enslaved, which informs every aspect of their life, makes them lesser people than they would otherwise be. He then restores their humanity by saying that if they weren’t enslaved, they would actually be better than the whites; he brings up the idea of education, writing that if the enslaved were taught science, they would surpass whites due to their intelligence and desire to learn.

Wiederhold is not content just to advocate for the humanity of the enslaved persons, but also shames those who own slaves and treat them poorly, saying that the treatment of the enslaved in America is a shame on all of humanity. Writing that in Germany they treat their animals better both extracts himself and his homeland from responsibility for the treatment of the enslaved and evokes the image of a barbaric and uncompassionate America.

Wiederhold and his friend Sobbe, not content to merely write about the barbarity of American slavery, undermined power structures while in America: Lieutenant Sobbe told an enslaved woman she was God’s creation, and that when she died, she would not only
go to Heaven, but could be of a higher worth to God than her masters. By legitimizing her connection to God, Sobbe gave her ideological power and equality, to some degree, in life: if this woman viewed herself as equal to her masters in God’s eyes, she could empower herself spiritually and ideologically, even if only in private.\(^97\) Moreover, by saying that she would likely have a better “fate” in Heaven than her masters, Sobbe undermined the power structure inherent to slavery; although the Hessians were unable to effect an actual change in status for this woman, giving her the belief of spiritual equality not only during her life, but in Heaven, he was able to change her perception of her spiritual status, which was doubtless freeing.

Sobbe’s audacity in helping to ideologically free this enslaved woman suggests that he did not care about the repercussions of his actions, as if the master of the enslaved woman were to find out about their conversation, the master would no doubt be furious with both him and the enslaved woman. It is a testament to the unique environment the Hessians occupied in America, that even officers, who had a stake in perpetuating established authority, rejected it. Such rejection was uncommon for officers, but was an often an impulse of lower ranking soldiers; desertion, or cursing at an officer, are examples of such rejection. Sobbe’s actions are more evidence for the freeing, and modifying, influence of America.

It is important to note that Wiederhold and Sobbe in no way represent every Hessian’s views of American slavery. Other mentions of slavery range from expressing the same sentiments as Wiederhold\(^98\) to those which are decidedly dispassionate.\(^99\) It is

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\(^{97}\) The act of expressing oneself in private, because the social situation doesn’t allow it otherwise, was what journal writing was to some Hessian soldiers.

\(^{98}\) Burgoyne, *Platte Grenadier*, p 62. [4 June 1780]
also difficult to know, from this story, whether Wiederhold and Sobbe made any connections between the master’s relationship with the slave and their prince’s, or even their own, relationship with the common soldiers.

Their silence on the subject allows some speculation: given the symbolic potency of the enslaved, and the Hessians’ awareness of the American revolutionary rhetoric which defined them as slaves to their Prince, one could understand Sobbe’s interaction with this enslaved woman and Wiederhold’s subsequent editorializing not as rejecting a master-slave relationship, but as rejecting cruelty, which is here understood as the master withholding autonomy from the slave, within that relationship. These Hessians advocate for equality before God, clothing, and education, the lack of which they find disturbing and cruel. Perhaps these are three rights they do not deny their soldiers, or perhaps they are what define an acceptable master-slave relationship; if the slave has even limited autonomy, as defined by these rights, the relationship is sound. Maybe the presence of those rights in their home was the reason Wiederhold and Sobbe returned to their native lands after the war was over.

99 “There is no one on this island [Staten Island] except the black (wild people) occupants, who, however, have no houses but live in the woods. The white people have gradually taken over the island and made the blacks their slaves. The whites trade them [the blacks] among themselves daily and pay 100 pounds or more, sterling, for a young boy because no black has any rights. The whites own the blacks as their slaves.” The journaler does not express empathy with, or hatred towards, the slaves. He merely notes them dispassionately, as though it were a part of the American Landscape.


100 This statement made, of course, with the awareness that Hegel’s famous passage in the Phenomenology of Spirit would not be thought of for many years. His translator just happened to coopt the most concise way of naming a relationship between a master and a slave.

101 These three rights give one autonomy: equality before God means that everyone’s moral obligations and definitions of those obligations are equally important, which liberates those who may not think their decisions matter; clothing is a status symbol which allows one to interact with society as a member of a community, rather than as an outsider of lesser value, and, as has been shown by the Hessians, interactions with society constantly bring up issues of autonomy; education is an age-old route to autonomy, highlighted by individual understanding of one’s environment, and the subsequent ability to act with understanding.
It is difficult to know whether any other Hessians shared these beliefs, which brings up a good point: Hessians all had their own personal beliefs of what constituted a just relationship between government and subject; in the story above, interpretation led to an understanding of what they might be for two soldiers. Other soldiers had to determine for themselves what an acceptable level of autonomy was within their relationship to their government. This question may have been raised by interactions with enslaved people.

**Misery and Suicide**

*Feilitzsch:* O Lord, thou keepest me here. O Lord, thou keepest: my spirit, my body; my dreams cruel torment, for when I wake, I remember I breathe American air. Next year, I wish, to come to Germany. And my fate, O Lord, pales next to others; my legs have healed, others have lost theirs. O Lord, thou testeth me here; and next year. Me and all. We may have earned your anger through our actions, but have we not settled our spiritual debt? To float on winds again to Germany, to float, to float, to where winds blow soft against the cheek. O Lord, to float on sun-warmed grass. This winter is bad, here. It is a bad winter. Deliver us from the cold.¹⁰²

Feilitzsch is a particularly miserable Hessian, which is strange, as he is an officer and so would presumably have access to a better life than the common soldier. But he brings up another important aspect of the Hessian experience of America: Misery.

Suicide was fairly prolific: among many others there were: Friedrich Krause, 28, servant of a Captain, shot himself; Johann August Heyne, servant of Chaplain, 22, hung himself; Christian Hoffmann, corporal, 26, shot himself.¹⁰³ Soldiers who were caught in the act were punished severely, in ways that would make any modern psychoanalyst cringe. The most common punishment for attempted suicide was running the gauntlet:

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soldiers form two lines facing each other, ready their weapons, and the punished runs between them, dodging blows; the punishment for suicide was generally to run seven to twelve times: “Field Jaeger Hahn tried to drown himself and therefore was punished by running the gauntlet twelve times.”¹⁰⁴ This was not only painful and brutal punishment, but was also a group shaming of the soldier that could have led to further depression. As there were no psychoanalysts trying to relieve the soldier’s post-traumatic stress disorder (which, incidentally, was not known about at that time), their depression was ignored until they either shaped up or attempted suicide again:

Friederich Wendt, committed suicide with his own weapon in the garden of his host in the parish of St. Pierre in the district of Quebec on 17 February [1780]. He had previously attempted suicide in the garden but been prevented from doing so. For that he had been punished with a demotion which caused him severe depression and made him very sick. He was given his former rank and restored to duty and conducted himself in a proper manner, except that at times he complained about his sorry fate, because he had been a student in the orphan’s home in Halle. He wished to spend this time studying but was prevented from doing so. His depression returned suddenly while in the country, so that he silently loaded his weapon and upon leaving the room of his host, said that he was going bird shooting, but then shot himself in the garden. He was 25 years old.¹⁰⁵

There are many reasons a Hessian would commit suicide; many journalers note desires to return to Germany, or express such sentiments indirectly via longing for German food, frustration with American weather, or comparisons of various animals with ones from their hometown (which are inevitably found to be better); depression was a common experience of the Hessian soldier, and was likely the main cause for suicide. One could also interpret the act of suicide in a more modern context, where much of the language surrounding it centers on the idea of autonomy. To commit suicide, particularly when one

is a soldier with few options, could be interpreted as a way to take back the power over one’s body; this is particularly relevant for mercenaries, whose bodies were literally controlled and sold; in many instances the Prince would be compensated for any killed soldier. The Hessians were aware of this, so, for those Hessians who felt that they had no longer control over their body, suicide may have been a way of asserting their autonomy.

**DESERPTION**

The Hessians lived peacefully in huts in the woods in Winchester, Maryland. The English prisoners had tried to desert, but were caught. They had faced a predicament familiar to children, dogs, and prisoners: who would take in these runaways? As a result, the English were guarded in a prison. The Hessians, however, were not only unguarded, but were allowed freedom to go about the city; the residents of the area had calmed down since that first violent night.

**GRENADIER 1:** Why do you think the citizens accept us now, in such strong contrast to the other night in City Hall, when we were chased out of the city?

**GRENADIER 2:** I have been thinking about this also. I think, since we are allowed to go ten to fifteen miles and even farther from the camp, our presence has become less unusual to the inhabitants of the area. The fact that the American Army trusts us may also have an impression on them.

**GRENADIER 1:** Right, and look at the English! They are hated by the Americans, both in and out of the army, and are locked up and kept under tight guard.

**GRENADIER 2:** Also, what I have learned from speaking from the inhabitants of this city is, many of them think that we would rather remain in America than return to the English Army or to our homes.

**GRENADIER 1:** Would you?

**GRENADIER 2:** Personally, no. I want to return to my home.

**GRENADIER 1:** Don't let him speak for all of us, though! I think that I will stay here.

**GRENADIER 2:** Oh really? Why?

**GRENADIER 1** (*blushing*): I began a correspondence with a beautiful girl, whom I met in Philadelphia. I am going to marry her, and start a farm here in America.

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106 The princes of Hesse-Hanau, Brunswick, and Waldeck were all granted this contract. Ingroa, *The Hessian Mercenary State*, p 137.


108 Relationships with women were quite common, and often a main factor in a Hessian soldier’s decision to stay in America; there were many marriages between Hessians and American women while in America.
GRENADIER 2: You will desert?
GRENADIER 1: If we are traded back to the English Army before the end of the war, I will, yes. If we are not, though, I will refuse the bail and remain here.
GRENADIER 2: I have not found someone yet, but I hope to. Brother, you have inspired me. I will stay here as well. Why not? I have already more prospects here than I had at home! Perhaps I can find a future job while walking around this city.\[109\]

A series of letter excerpts from Captain von Eschwege explains both the common scenarios for Hessians who were prisoners of the Americans when the war ended, as well as the potential reasons for deserting or remaining in America:

Your Highness will be surprised to see in the list that so any men have taken service with the Americans and still others have indentured themselves, but the Americans have applied cruel methods to force the men to do that. First Congress sent the captives written addresses in which they were informed that they had been completely forgotten by the King and by their princes, and that they had no hope of being exchanged. As a minimum compensation for their long confinement, Congress asks eighty Spanish dollars for each man and then he can have his freedom and settle in the country as a free citizen. Those who can not pay the eighty dollars should find a farmer, who will pay for them, and as a repayment, they are to work as servants for three years. The other choice is to become a soldier, as most are encouraged to do, and they have been promised many things.\[110\]

From Your Highness’ Leib Company there was not a single man on this ship and I am sorry to mention to Your Highness that most of the men from the company have contracted with the farmers for two or three years, which time must be fulfilled, and I fear that it will be difficulty even then to get them away. According to the information which I could get about the men, some of them have already married.\[111\]

I have reports of five or six who will surely return, if it is possible, since they have indentured themselves. However, the others have told their comrades, who have returned, that they have no desire to return to Germany and that they wish to seek their fortune in America.\[112\]

For a list of some of the marriages between Hessians, see: Bruce E Burgoyne, These were the Hessians, (Westminster, Md: Heritage Books, 2008); Burgoyne, Enemy Views, pp 562-72.
\[109\] [Fiction] Burgoyne, Enemy Views, p 135. [Private Johannes Reuber of the Rall Grenadier Regiment; 8 October 1777]
\[110\] Burgoyne, Enemy Views, pp 498-9. [Captain von Eschwege; 15 December 1782]
\[111\] Ibid. [Captain von Eschwege; 14 January 1783]
\[112\] Ibid, p 530. [Captain von Eschwege, on board the transport ship Joseph, at New York; 23 May 1783]
It is true that many of those indentured men have no desire to rejoin the regiment, but there are some among them who have a strong desire to return to their fatherland.\footnote{Ibid, p 531. [Captain von Eschwege, from The Downs, England; 31 July 1783]}

If this is representative, it is surprising any Hessians actually returned; there was not a single man from the Leib Regiment on the ship back to America, and then the only good news which Eschwege gives his prince is that five or six men are going to maybe return, if they are able to get back to Germany after indenturing themselves. Eschwege justifies this great number of deserters by saying that the Americans used cruel manipulation to achieve it, which has some basis in fact: prisoners of war interned at Lancaster in the summer of 1782 were given only ten ounces of meat and bread per day, and in Reading, Pennsylvania, they put three hundred men in a jail intended for only sixty men. The soldiers explained that they would have to agree to join the Americans if they were not helped soon, and “Vaupel correctly assumed that the prisoners were treated so badly in order to make them enlist [in the American army].”\footnote{Ordres aus dem engl. Hauptquartier (1782) and Bericht über die Vernehmung der aus amerikanischer Kriegsgefangenschaft befreiten Hessen-Hanauischen Soldaten (1.1.1783). StAM, Best. 4h Nr. 3153, f. 140-42.}

It is possible that not all soldiers truly wanted to stay in America, but found they had no other choice, which is a good way to limit my thesis that the Hessians’ experience of autonomy led to a self-definition as Americans. Captured soldiers who were forced into indentured servitude would have had less autonomy than at home. Which brings up an important point about autonomy: it is ultimately about making a choice. Those soldiers who did not choose to remain in America but were forced to experienced America as more oppressive than their homes; those who did choose to stay experienced the opposite; to help understand which was which we have desertion.
Desertion was a common way to assert one’s autonomy in the face of strict control, and was not something new brought out in an American context. Hessians deserted the army in their hometowns as well, and often for the same reasons: better options elsewhere. 115 Those Hessians who had deserted while the Revolution was still going on had successfully swindled their government out of a ship ride to America; the complete rejection of their old society and government made this a revolutionary act. 116 But, desertion after the war was over was different. There is something so touching about the Hessians who wanted to leave their homeland behind, but did not wish to leave dishonestly; these Hessians served their term until the end of the war, almost as if to say thank you for the opportunity of the ship ride here and ability to start a new life. They were discharged, and could begin a new life in America; this was a noble expression of autonomy and subsequent self-definition.

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116 Major desertions took place during the evacuation of Philadelphia and during the march across NJ in June, 1778; on Cornwallis’ march north to Virginia in the Spring and Summer of 1781; at Savannah GA and Charleston SC prior to the evacuation by the British in 1782; from the Convention Army as it moved from Saratoga to Boston to Virginia in 1777-1779; from Frederick MD between 1782 and May 1783; from POW facilities at Lancaster, PA and Winchester, VA; and in the vicinity of Manhattan and Long Island during the period from 1776 to Nov. 1783. Source: Valley Forge Monument
CONCLUSION:

The Hessians tell a story which differs in profundity; I am wary of presenting a hero’s tale, in which a slave is forced to travel to another country, there finds ways of expressing and changing himself and, in the end, throws off the yoke of his oppressor, declaring, I will remain here, where I can be free.

What was common for all of the soldiers was their completely unique position within the society: there were many oppressors, many revolutionaries, but only one group which was able to alternate between those two groups with few, if any, consequences. Their tendency towards autonomy is perhaps the most important aspect of their existence in America. Because of this, the role of the Hessians in the American Revolution was singular in its ambivalence; they could occupied whatever role they wanted (within all restrictions that could be expected of a prisoner or soldier).

Idleness is the root of all evil. A person goes walking to drive away boredom, then enters the Post Inn and gets drunk, sometimes remaining all night. Sometimes he goes to the Jew because he has a very fine maid servant who is not of a nature to refuse. In this manner a person goes through the city and acts like a fool, passing himself off as a Frenchman, a Spaniard, or a Russian, each new persona absolving the sins of the previous.117

As the American Revolution went on, the way Hessians wrote about themselves and their homeland changed. Certain soldiers, mostly those of higher rank, constantly longed for their homeland (Feilitzsch is one of these); many arrived happily back in Germany. Others, however, regurgitated the ideology of the American Revolution in their writings. The most striking example of this is when Chaplain Waldeck states that the Hessians
were working like slaves; using “slaves” to describe oneself in relation to one’s ruler shows the influence of American revolutionary rhetoric, which contained the same terminology. To be convinced that this rhetoric, which was similar to any Enlightenment ideals they heard at home, applied to them, the Hessians had to develop a personal connection to it.

Only when Hessian soldiers were relieved of their need to be soldiers did they have experiences which were meaningful enough to have a non-traumatic impact on them. When Hessian soldiers were captives of the Continental Army, they were able to shed their identity as soldiers in order to experience America as individuals; since they were not ideologically motivated to fight and were viewed as having the capability to be autonomous, once they were no longer required to fight, they were just people, not soldiers.

Being captured was one of the better things which could happen to Hessian soldiers. “For British and Hessian officers, the captivity experience included paroles for up to ten miles, so they could roam around freely; housing in inns or private residences; pay from British paymasters in hard British currency.” Being captive, however, did not guarantee Hessian soldiers the acceptance of the American people.

Many (German-) Americans hated the Hessians both before and after the war. Rumors were propagated that the Hessians were animalistic, and inhumanly cruel; these were believed to such an extent that when many Americans saw Hessians in person they were only with difficulty convinced that it was really the Hessians they were viewing.

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117 Burgoyne, Feilitzsch, p 59. [27 March 1780]
118 In other words, they were seen as people who could decide for themselves which government suited them best (and the Americans hoped that government would be theirs.)
Hessians also gained the hatred of the American people because they viewed plundering from civilians as partial pay in the war zone. “The term *Hessian* in America became derogatory and signified an aggressive, professional soldier full of disdain and contempt for Americans; more important, he was a soldier who killed only for money.”\(^\text{120}\) Even in 1863 a newspaper editor insults someone who sent in a derogatory letter by calling him “an unmannerly, vulgar clown, a simpering, sniveling, white livered *Hessian*.”\(^\text{121}\)

Over time, the term has been lost as the Hessians themselves are forgotten; our images of Germany are now influenced by their actions this last century rather than those of two centuries before.

Hessians had the opportunity to convince those Americans they met that all the rumors they had heard were wrong, and that they were in fact all unique people with individual personalities. To convince someone of who you are requires a strong sense of self; this was not something that any Hessian soldier necessarily lacked, but understanding himself in the context of his homeland was something quite different from understanding himself in the context of the American Revolution: the flux of war required strong statements, as the constant swirl of ideas, flags, violence, and love created an environment in which everything came into question. This environment altered most Hessians’ perceptions of themselves and relationships to everything surrounding them; in this space journals were written, and Hessians explored a new-found autonomy.

“[W]e finally arrived, happily, back in Germany, after eight years. It must be


\(^{120}\) Ibid, 28.

conceded by everyone, that we arrived here completely changed.”

A formative experience it was. For those who returned to their homelands, things were forever altered; it must be hoped that these soldiers used any beneficial knowledge gained in America to improve their lives, societally and as subjects.

Those who stayed in America had already experienced so much that was new, and would continue to do so. Their experience with autonomy and a subsequent self-definition had prepared them for the coming time, when they gradually integrated themselves into American society. Although there was certainly a Hessian diaspora into America, many of them chose to stay in Pennsylvania and New York, as those were areas which had already been settled by German-speakers, and the culture was, if not completely similar to their homeland’s, more familiar.

But it was not as easy as all that. The wanna-be Americans had to work or pay for their right to be a citizen.

The Americans offered any soldier married to an American release for a fixed sum. Congress also gave permission for the German soldiers to swear allegiance, or ‘for thirty pounds, that is, eighty Spanish dollars, it was possible to buy freedom out of captivity, or to allow an inhabitant to buy freedom, and we could work off the indebtedness.’ They could also join the Continental Army, and American recruiters made special efforts to sign them up. The Americans made no such offer to their British prisoners.

Most Hessians who wished to stay in America, lacking the ability to pay, indentured themselves to Americans who were willing to buy their freedom. Captivity became an individual debt; a determined sum to be repaid, often gladly, by work or military

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122 Burgoyne, *Enemy Views*, p 553. [Hesse-Cassel Platte Grenadier Battalion, 20 April 1784]
service. Their term of service was roughly 2-3 years, which gave them time to improve their English fluency and develop useful contacts for when their contracted servitude was over. This term was shorter than the indentured servitude other emigrants from the Holy Roman Empire contracted into, but it did implicitly link the Hessians’ first experiences of being Americans with those of other German-American emigrants. After their term was over, they settled down, to lead a new life that would hopefully integrate them thoroughly into American society. This process had specifically American precedents; by indenturing themselves, the Hessians joined a pre-existing emigration movement to America.

Their self-definition as Americans was explicitly written in the beginning of the Declaration of Independence; by agreeing to those specific principles, the Hessians enabled us to see a hint of a hero’s journey in their experience of America: a soldier finds, in a new environment, a lack of patriotic and societal obligations freeing, as he can determine his actions and obligations [Kantian autonomy], and subsequently choose which laws he wishes to subject himself to [Rousseauian autonomy], creating a restrictive [self definition]. It is ironic, and illustrates the process of their American

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125 Indentured servitude died down in the beginning of the 19th century, which put an end to that emigration movement; it primarily involved young poor single men.

126 We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, – That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.
experience, that once the Hessians defined themselves as those who desired “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness”, they were denied access to those ideals as they were forced into slavery for a few years.

We must not forget about Sleepy Hollow, NY, and the Headless Horseman flitting through the woods, in search of something he lost during the American Revolution.

What was it that he lost? Perhaps his autonomy. The Hessians were no longer an unknown group of foreigners; through their interactions with Americans they had firmly created an identity for themselves. And now, they were confronted with the identity they had made; their ambiguity gone, they were ensnared within the effects of their conversations and actions during the Revolution, and their self-definition as Americans afterwards. Perhaps the Headless Horseman, a character who is our contemporary imagining of the Hessian, and who was the cultural imagining of a Hessian not too long after the Revolution, seeks that same rush of autonomy he experienced during the war.

It is unfitting, then, that in our newest version of *Sleepy Hollow* the Hessian finds his head, in the end, and dies, for our imagining of a Hessian is that of a violent, animalistic, barbaric mercenary; ideologically, we have returned to the time before the Revolution. What we need, then, is to give again to the Hessians that autonomy they had during the Revolution – to forget our biases against them – and allow them to self-define once more.

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127 Although the Headless Horseman was “not like the others [Hessians]” this most famous American portrayal of a Hessian still inherently represents all other Hessians in the American cultural imagining. *Sleepy Hollow* (1999). Script accessed November 18, 2013, at: http://sfy.ru/?script=sleepy_hollow.
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**NEWSPAPERS**


**ONLINE**


APPENDIX

PROPAGANDA FROM THE CONTINENTAL CONGRESS AIMED AT HESSIANS

It is with no small pleasure, when in this first address we ever made to you we must call you enemies, that we can affirm you to be unprovoked enemies. We have not invaded your country, slaughtered wounded or captivated your parents children or kinsfolk, burned plundered or desolated your towns and villages, wasted your farms and cottages, spoiled you of your goods, or annoyed your trade. On the contrary, all your countrymen who dwell among us, were received as friends, and treated as brethren, participating equally with our selves of all our rights, franchises and privileges. We have not aided ambitious princes and potentates in subjugating you. We should glory being instrumental in the deliverance of mankind from bondage and oppression. What then induced you to join in this quarrel with our foes, strangers to you, unconnected with you, and at so great a distance from both you and us? Do you think the cause you are engaged in just on your side? To decide that we might safely appeal to the judicious and impartial—but we have appealed to the righteous judge of all the earth, inspired with humble confidence and well-grounded hopes, that the lord of hosts will fight our battles, whilst we are vindicating that inheritance we own ourselves indebted to his bounty alone for. Were you compelled by your sovereigns to undertake the bloody work of butchering your unoffending fellow creatures? Disdain the inhuman office, disgraceful to the soldier. Did lust of conquest prompt you? The victory, unattainable by you if heaven was not against us, which we know of no good reason you have to expect, or we to dread, shall cost you more than the benefits derived from it will be equivalent to; since it will be disputed by those who are resolved inflexibly to live no longer than they can enjoy the liberty you are hired to rob them of, and who are conscious of a dignity of character, which a contempt of every danger threatening the loss of that blessing seldom fails to accompany. Were you tempted by the prospect of exchanging the land you left for happier regions,—for a land of plenty and abhorrent of despotism? We wish this may be your motive; because we have the means, and want not inclination, to gratify your desires, if they be not hostile, without loss to ourselves, perhaps with less expense, certainly with more honour and with more advantage to you than victory can promise. Numberless germans and other foreigners settled in this country will testify this truth. To give you farther assurance of it, we have resolved, 

Mistake not this for an expedient suggested by fear. In military virtue we doubt not Americans will prove themselves to be second to none; their numbers exceed you and your confederates; in resources they now do or soon will abound. Neither suppose that we would seduce you to a treacherous defection. If you have been persuaded to believe, that it is your duty, or will be your interest to assist those who prepare, in vain we trust, to destroy us; go on; and, when you shall fall into our hands, and experience less severity of punishment than ruffians, and savages deserve, attribute it to that lenity, which is never separate from magnanimity. But if, exercising your own judgments, you have spirit enough to assert that freedom which all men are born to, associate yourselves with those who
desire, and think they are able to secure it, with all the blessings of peace, to you and your posterity.\textsuperscript{128}

\textsc{Depictions of Hessian Soldiers}\textsuperscript{129}

\textit{Von Donop Regiment; Regiment v. Knyphausen [1784]}


RALL REGIMENT; REGIMENT VON WÖLLWARTH [1777]; REGIMENT VON TRÜMBACH [1778]; REGIMENT MARQUIS D’ANGELLI [1779]
FIELD JÄGER CORPS
und auch die Ammunition geflogen wurden.
Hier hinter dem Fort Johnston wurde eine
Patrone auf einem Salzstock angelegt
von einer Kanone und Ammunition gen
braucht wurde. Weil auf diesem Stock
so großes Volum von Schußwaffen ausgege
ben wurde, welches uns um so auffällig
vorkam, da dieses Bild mit stark be
vohnt war, erkannten wir uns nach
der Ursache und erfuhren, daß solche leere
Soldaten von zwei englischen Regimenter
waren, welche in einer nahe hierbei ge
standenen und minimalen Parabole gela
gen. Beide Regimenter waren benach
bar in einem Jahr nach ihrer Ankunft von
Europa fast ganzlich ausgestorben. Eine
Nachricht versagte bei uns den Glauben
daf wir nicht gar lange hier bleiben
müßten. Nachdem Männer die zwei
leichttrippen sich auf diesem Inseln
befanden, gingen heute die leichte Infan
trie, Artillerie Grenadiere, der 75, 80 km,
MAP OF THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE [1789]

131 Accessed on 04/25/14, found on: http://www.pantel-web.de/bw_mirror/maps/d1789.jpg
INFORMATION ON SOLDIERS MENTIONED [IF AVAILABLE]
REUBER, JOHANNES (ca. 1757)  

*Place of Origin:*  
Niedervellmar, Germany (Hessen-Kassel)

*Category of Presentation:*  
Captured (as prisoner of war)

*Regiment:*  
Rall Regiment, after 1777 von Wöllwarth, 1778 von Trümbach, after 1779 von Angelelly Regiment

*Rank:*  
Grenadier

*Further Evidence:*  
5.1779: captured · Rall · Private □  
12.1779: ransomed · Rall · Private □  
10.1783: on leave · Rall 4 · Private □

WALDECK, PHILIPP  

*Category of Presentation:*  
appointed (especially in the unit rolls)

*Regiment:*  
Third English-Waldeck Mercenary Regiment

*Rank:*  
Chaplain

*Further Evidence:*  
[not specified]: appointed · Waldeck · [not specified] □  
[not specified]: promoted · Waldeck · Private □  
6.1779: appointed · Waldeck · Chaplain  
12.1779: appointed · Waldeck · Chaplain □  
6.1780: appointed · Waldeck · Chaplain □  
12.1780: appointed · Waldeck · Chaplain □  
6.1781: appointed · Waldeck · Chaplain □  
7.1781: appointed · Waldeck · Chaplain  
12.1781: appointed · Waldeck · Chaplain □  
6.1782: appointed · Waldeck · Chaplain □

12.1782: appointed · Waldeck · Chaplain

WASMUS, JULIUS AKA HEYDELBACH, JEREMIAS JUSTUS (ca. 1740)\(^{134}\)

Category of Presentation:
Induction as a recruit

Regiment:
Hesse-Hanau Regiment of the Crown Prince

Rank:
Regimental Assistant Medical Officer

born:
1740/1741

Age (calculated):
35

Further Evidence:
2.1776: other induction (especially through transfer) · Hesse-Hanau Regiment of the Crown Prince · Regimental Assistant Medical Officer
2.1776: other induction (especially through transfer) · Hesse-Hanau Regiment of the Crown Prince · Regimental Assistant Medical Officer
3.1776: appointed · Hesse-Hanau Regiment of the Crown Prince 1 · Surgeon
4.1779: appointed · Hesse-Hanau Regiment of the Crown Prince ·
7.1781: appointed · Hesse-Hanau Regiment of the Crown Prince · Assistant medical officer
9.1781: ransomed · Hesse-Hanau Regiment of the Crown Prince · Regimental Assistant Medical Officer
8.1782: appointed · Hesse-Hanau Regiment of the Crown Prince · Regimental Assistant Medical Officer
2.1783: appointed · Hesse-Hanau Regiment of the Crown Prince · Regimental Assistant Medical Officer
7.1783: restationed · Hesse-Hanau Regiment of the Crown Prince · Regimental Assistant Medical Officer

WIEDERHOLD, ANDREAS (ca. 1732)\(^{135}\)

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Place of Origin:
Spangenberg, Germany (Hessen-Kassel)

Category of Presentation:
Promoted

Regiment:
von Knyphausen Regiment, after 1784 von Donop

Rank:
First Lieutenant

Further Evidence:
12.1776: appointed · von Knyphausen · Lieutenant
12.1776: appointed · von Knyphausen 3 · Lieutenant
12.1776: captured · von Knyphausen 4 · First Lieutenant
2.1777: captured · von Knyphausen 3 · First Lieutenant
2.1777: captured · von Knyphausen · First Lieutenant
1.1778: captured · von Minnigerode 4 · First Lieutenant
4.1778: appointed · von Knyphausen · First Lieutenant
4.1778: ransomed · von Knyphausen · First Lieutenant
8.1778: appointed · von Knyphausen 3 · Lieutenant
11.1778: promoted · von Knyphausen · Staff Captain
11.1778: promoted · von Knyphausen · Staff Captain
9.1779: captured · von Knyphausen · Staff Captain
3.1782: promoted · von Knyphausen · Brigade Major
4.1782: transferred · von Knyphausen 2 · Staff Captain
4.1782: promoted · von Knyphausen 5 · Commanding Officer
4.1783: other induction (especially through transfer) · von Knyphausen 5 · Staff Captain
2.1785: separated in Europe · von Knyphausen · Staff Captain