

## Hessians

Britain possessed a professional army and the world's greatest navy.

Furthermore, the colonists had virtually no history of cooperating with one another, even in the face of danger.

In addition, many in the cabinet were swayed by disparaging assessments of American soldiers leveled by British officers in earlier wars. For instance, during the French and Indian War (1754-63), Brig. Gen. James Wolfe had described America's soldiers as "cowardly dogs."

Henry Ellis, the royal governor of Georgia, nearly simultaneously asserted that the colonists were a "poor species of fighting men" given to "a want of bravery."

By the start of the American Revolution, the British military was spread thinly across their global empire. In 1775, in America, the total size of the British army, excluding militia, consisted of 48,647 soldiers. Of these soldiers about 39,294 were infantry, 6,869 were cavalry and 2,484 were artillery. (History of Massachusetts)

By European standards the British Army was extremely small - the French maintained a force nearly four times larger - but many in Britain did not see the need for a large army.

By the eve of the American Revolution, the majority of the men in the ranks had never seen active military service and were not battle hardened veterans. The exception were many of the army's non-commissioned officers. These men formed the backbone of the regiment and were often veterans of many years or even decades of service. (Battlefields)

As the war in America dragged on the British Army expanded rapidly. At least 50,000 soldiers fought in America, with many more serving in the West Indies, Europe, and India. Britain struggled to meet these manpower needs with volunteer enlistments and soon turned to other means.

Despite having tens of thousands of troops in America throughout the war, it was still necessary to supplement their numbers by hiring foreign troops.

Landgrave (Prince) Fredrick II of Hesse-Cassel was the son in law of King George II, giving him a valuable family tie to the Hanovers. The Landgrave's ancestors had been involved in every major conflict Great Britain found itself in with its roots going back to the Nine Years War (1688-97).

It is also worth noting that the British brought in soldiers from other parts of the Holy Roman Empire as well, those being the principalities of Brunswick, Anspach-Bayreuth, Waldeck, and Anhalt-Zerbst, as well as Hesse-Hanau.

However, because of the Landgrave's peacetime buildup of troops, political ties, and reputation, Hesse-Cassel was the main source of troops, hence the colonists donning them with the broad nickname 'Hessians.' (Journal)

Hesse-Cassel was Europe's most militarized state, that includes Prussia, the military giant to the north. Men were trained from adolescence and continued their training well through adulthood until they were deemed unfit or too old to serve.

Much like America's National Guard, they would take a few weeks out of every summer to drill.

The Landgrave was so enthralled with this way of life he drilled soldiers himself every day no matter the weather, and added his own ideas to a system that copied the famous Prussian military.



Two centuries of warfare had created a true military society. Most politicians, including high ranking nobles such as the Prince, had either served themselves or had sons who were officers that bolstered their families' positions. Unique among European armies, even commoners could become officers through merit.

By 1776 thousands of Hessian soldiers were pouring into New York (although soldiers from other German states also saw action in America). They were from the culturally and religiously diverse regions of what is now southwest Germany. Research into these soldiers contracted to fight in the war gives us an enlightening history that shows just how global a war the American Revolution really was. (Journal)

Hiring a foreign army was not unusual in the eighteenth century. For Hesse-Cassel, soldiers were a major export. By renting its army to the British, Hesse-Cassel took in an amount equal to about thirteen years' worth of tax revenue.

This allowed the state's prince, the Landgraf Friedrich II, to keep taxes low and public spending high. A man of the Enlightenment, Friedrich oversaw public works projects, administered a public welfare system, and encouraged education.

Even so, military needs dominated the country. When boys turned seven they were registered for military service, and each year men ages sixteen to thirty had to present themselves to an official for possible induction.

Some men were exempted because their occupations were considered vital to the state. But others, such as school dropouts, bankrupts, servants without masters, idlers, and the unemployed, were deemed "expendable people" and could be forced into service at any time.

Life in the Hessian Army was harsh. The system aimed to instill iron discipline and the punishments could be brutal.

Still, morale was generally high. Officers were well-educated, promotion was by merit, and soldiers took pride in serving their prince and their people.

Furthermore, military service provided economic benefits. The families of soldiers were exempt from certain taxes, wages were higher than in farm work, and there was the promise of booty (money earned through the sale of captured military property) and plunder (property taken from civilians).

Officially plunder was verboten (forbidden), but officers, who also had a taste for looted goods, often looked the other way.

The German soldiers who came to fight were established soldiers in their national armies who were required by their country to serve; the Landgrave of Hesse-Cassel himself pocketed the money.

This was a widely unpopular move. American Patriots and sympathizers in Europe quickly turned this against the British government. (Journal)

The colonists had been primed: News reports described the mercenaries as blood-thirsty butchers coming to kill them. So, when their troop transport ships weighed anchor, the Continental Congress implored the colonists to "step forth" in defense of "everything they hold dear."

Many answered the call to repel these foreign invader - and the Hessians' presence became an accelerant that sped the transformation of the conflict in the colonies into a full-scale war to defend the homeland and secure American independence. (Smithsonian)

Thomas Jefferson included in the Declaration of Independence's list of grievances that King George III had dispatched "foreign troops" from the German states to help the British fight the colonists.

Jefferson was outraged that the king would hire Hessian mercenaries to suppress British subjects.

The Declaration of Independence condemned the king for,

transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

During the war, Hessian plundering often pushed neutral or indifferent Americans to the Patriot side.

Though the men who were first sent to America served willingly, the burden of honoring an agreement to keep a minimum of 12,000 troops in America caused the Landgrave to look elsewhere for soldiers.

This included unfortunate travelers, criminals, and other 'undesirables' that Fredrick's fellow princes were eager to be rid of. Others enlisted willingly; the enlistment incentives and a free ride to America made the dangers worthwhile to many. Those already in the army who opted to desert rather than go to America did so out of fear of being separated from their families or dying during the crossing. (Journal)

German soldiers, whether from Hesse or other German states, would see action from the city of Quebec to the wilderness of Florida. The majority landed in New York in the summer of 1776. There they fought in the battles over Fort Lee and Fort Washington, and were made infamous to militiamen after the Battle of White Plains.

Hessians pushed General Washington to the shores of the Delaware and looted and destroyed many of the beautiful homes that dotted New Jersey.

### **Washington Crosses the Delaware to Attack Hessians at Trenton**

What many Americans identify as the most memorable moment of the American Revolution is the image of General George Washington - standing with one knee bent at the front of a ship, leading his troops to a surprise attack after crossing the Delaware River.

Washington attacked the Hessian military base (belonging to hired German soldiers who fought for the British) in Trenton, New Jersey, on Christmas Day 1776, inspiring new hope for the cause of the Patriot Army.

Provisions were low, as was morale, during this period. Washington feared more troubles were ahead for the Continental Army. As losses mounted for the Americans, it became more difficult to recruit and retain soldiers, with many choosing to desert rather than face a cold winter of battle with limited supplies.

Washington understood the importance of a much-needed victory before the year let out, and a concentration of around 1,300 - 1,500 hired Hessians at Trenton became his target. Washington and his men (around 2,400, including future president James Monroe) were part of a larger plan that included two other crossings, but only his was successful in reaching the Hessians.

Still, they arrived in Trenton with plenty of artillery and support from Col. Henry Knox, who would be stationed with men at the top of the town. Sailing on cargo vessels that ranged from 40 to 60 feet in length across the frigid icy waters of the Delaware, Washington and his soldiers were hit with a harsh rain that turned to a snow-sleet mix by midnight.



Traveling with heavy artillery, horses, and more men behind him, Washington had support from experienced seamen under the command of Col. John Glover at the crossing site. (National Geographic)

The Hessians were somewhat aware an attack was coming, thanks to the work of British spies and American deserters. Although they did not fully expect Washington to attack, they were on alert that it was at least possible.

Constant false alarms coupled with bad weather conditions gave Washington the surprise opening he and his men needed to launch a successful attack, even if it took more time than anticipated.

Once the Continental Army arrived onshore, the Hessians surrendered before morning and the Americans sustained few casualties. Stories of this bold, overwhelming American victory grew in legend as it reached other colonists who supported rebellion against the British crown. (National Geographic)

The loss of Colonel Rall and 918 Hessians at Trenton and later hundreds more at Bennington and Saratoga were major defeats for the British during the war. Without these Germans who intimidated the colonists and operated effectively on the field, the Revolution would have been dramatically different. (Journal)

At the start of the war sending men to America was very convenient for the overpopulated German duchies. As the war went on and casualty rates went up, valuable tradesmen, farmers, and other workers were eventually the ones sent to America.

The country began to suffer, and the industries that were originally benefiting from the war began to fail. Eventually the debt of maintaining the long supply lines between America and the duchy became too much.

It had been expected that thousands of men would be sent from the countryside to supplement losses. However, the unprecedented length of the war had caught the British and the Hessian governments by surprise. Overwhelming losses to desertion and death, and the treatment of prisoners, horrified the people of Hesse. Worse yet, they ended up on the losing side. Political powers both British and German turned against the age old practice of hiring out troops. (Journal)

In total, nearly 30,000 German soldiers fought for the British in North America. Once there, they discovered a thriving German-American community of almost 200,000 people.

For many Hessians, the possibilities in this rich, new land with its growing German population was a great enticement to desertion - a fact that Americans worked hard to promote with promises of free land for Hessians willing to switch sides. An estimated 5,000 Germans stayed in this country, when their fellow countrymen returned home. (PBS)

Information here is primarily from History of Massachusetts; Journal of the American Revolution; Mount Vernon, David Head; PBS; National Geographic

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young