

## Commentary

### The Hessian Soldiers in the American Revolutionary War

When it became necessary for the British government to increase its military forces in the American colonies so as to try to suppress the Revolutionaries, the government turned to other countries for soldiers. Among the first leaders to agree to have troops go to America was Friedrich II, Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel. There were several reasons for his decision. For one, his first wife was the daughter of George II of England. For another, it was common practice at the time to have contingents of soldiers fight under the flag of another country which would pay for such service. That benefit for Hesse-Kassel would indeed turn out to be huge in the case of the subsidiary treaty arranged between William Faucitt, the British negotiator, and Martin Ernst von Schlieffen, the Hessian minister. As a consequence of the sums of money received for the soldiers and the increase in production in various war-related industries, the Landgrave could not only lower taxes but also make Kassel a universally acknowledged beautiful city. At his death he left a surplus of sixty million *Thaler*, or about twenty million pound sterling, in ready money, a good part of the surplus being the result of the sums paid by Great Britain for the soldiers. There were four other German states that entered into subsidiary agreements with England.

The total number of German soldiers shipped to America between 1776 and 1781 was about 30,000. Of these about 20,000 were from Hesse-Kassel (though a number of soldiers in the Hesse-Kassel regiments were from outside the country). The wisdom and overall consequences of Friedrich II's actions have been discussed by various scholars, several of them arriving at a much more positive view of his decision than the author of *Wahrheit und Guter Rath* (see especially Ingrao [1982]).

The German population reacted, if at all, with sadness to seeing soldiers depart for faraway America. People in general though did not question the validity of having soldiers hired out to foreign nations. The first and most impressive indictment of the practice came from Honoré Gabriel Riquetti, comte de Mirabeau, in his *Avis aux Hessois et autres peuples de l'Allemagne Vendus par leurs Princes à l'Angleterre* (1777). In a passionate appeal to the Hessians and other Germans Mirabeau

points out the blindness of those who obey their princes and go to America to fight the colonists. Again and again he condemns the German princes for their life of luxury which had led to great debts and thus to the need to hire out their subjects for money. Mirabeau warns the Hessians that they will regret bitterly their participation in the attempt to subdue the Revolutionaries who, in his opinion, were fully justified in defending their rights and freedom. The Hessians should change sides and join, together with other Germans who live under a despotic regime, their many happy compatriots in America who had already made their choice for freedom and who would welcome the defectors with open arms. The author of the 1783 pamphlet must have known Mirabeau's appeal, as I will try to show below and in the notes in connection with certain phrases and issues found in both texts. Friedrich II, Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel, bought up as many copies of Mirabeau's pamphlet he could get hold of. Schlieffen, his minister, then published a rejoinder which was also written in French. There were German translations of both pamphlets. It is interesting to note that there was also a rejoinder to the 1783 pamphlet, *Wahrheit und Guter Rath*, published in New York City. The rejoinder is entitled *Warnung eines hessischen Feldwebels an seine redliche Landsleuthe gegen die ihnen unter der Masque der Wahrheit und Guten Rathes von einem Verräter seines Vaterlandes gelegten Schlingen* (Warning by a Hessian Sergeant, addressed to his honest compatriots, of an attempt by a traitor to his fatherland to ensnare them behind the masque of truth and good advice). It was also published in 1783 and appears in reliable bibliographies. However, my search for the pamphlet has been unsuccessful. All indications point to Eberhardt Sauer the Third (also spelled Saur and Sower), as the probable author and most likely the printer. Eberhardt Sauer, member of the most prominent German-American family of printers, was an ardent loyalist. He had to flee from Philadelphia to New York City where he worked for the British in 1783.

The author of *Wahrheit und Guter Rath* must also have known Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776). As I will show in the notes, there are a reference to the Bible (p. 10) and a particularly striking passage against the cruelty of tyrants (p. 41) that the author of the 1783 pamphlet took from Paine.

When the Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, was informed that the British had hired foreign soldiers to augment their forces in America, Congress was outraged and even readier than before to declare independence. It was also resolved to try to lure these soldiers away from the British forces by a series of handbills that promised land, livestock, provisions, and credit to each deserter. The appeals to the officers and enlisted men vary in certain details but contain basically similar offers of land and livestock and a friendly welcome among the colonists. Often the appeals mention the fact that the colonists had done nothing against the soldiers and that they would find many compatriots living happily in America. In addition to official attempts to make German troops desert the British cause, there were private initiatives to make soldiers see that they were fighting on the wrong side. In contrast to *Wahrheit und Guter Rath*, the above-mentioned appeals are short and lack any literary quality.

## Desertion

The consensus is that the various attempts to persuade the German soldiers to leave their regiments and to settle in America had mixed results. The rate of desertion among the Hessian soldiers was low, especially early in the war. Later there were a good number who came over to the American side. Some of these had been prisoners of war for a long time and had been farmed out, ultimately to stay away from their regiments for good. Also, more and more soldiers comprising the Hessian regiments had been recruited from other German states and thus did not feel the same sense of loyalty the native soldiers felt toward their sovereign and their state. Among the deserters were also some who had enlisted so as to obtain free passage to America where they wanted to settle. Very few soldiers were aware of the political and philosophical issues involved in the War of Independence. If they had any opinion about the war at all, they thought that they were fighting for a just cause, against an ungrateful, disobedient people. They had their families in Hesse-Kassel or other German states and were looking forward to returning home with the money they had saved. Even the officers did not understand the causes underlying the American determination to rid the country of British rule. Their extensive reports on everyday events

during the war—they were required to write such reports for the Landgrave—did not question the validity of their fighting against the colonists. Given the background of the officers, such a conservative outlook is not surprising. The surprise is that the author of the 1783 pamphlet should have arrived at such different conclusions as to the legitimacy of the cause of the Revolutionaries.

### The Author

My pursuit of the identity of the pamphlet author led to many possible candidates. I am now certain however that it is Karl Friedrich Führer (1756-94) who wrote *Wahrheit und Guter Rath*. The reasons for my determination are presented best by sketching Führer's life. The following biographical data are based primarily on work done by Inge Auerbach, Kenneth S. Jones, and Alice H. Lerch. While there is uncertainty about the exact date of a few events in Führer's life and also about the precise role his debts played in his decision to defect, the basic facts are not in dispute.

Karl Friedrich's father, Friedrich Wilhelm Führer (1717-81), studied law at various universities, including at Göttingen, and then participated in the Austrian wars in Bavaria and the Netherlands as an officer in the Hessian army. He was demoted as a result of a conflict with his company major and in 1773 he was appointed "Road and Bridge" engineer, an office he held until his death at his home in Felsberg, a town on the Eder. Frederick Wilhelm Führer and his wife had six sons of whom Karl Friedrich was the fourth. Apparently, Karl Friedrich tended to get into debt, both in Hesse-Kassel and in America. As an ensign in the regiment led by Lieutenant General Wilhelm von Knyphausen he left Kassel on 9 May 1776 and England on 20 July 1776 for New York City where the regiment disembarked on 18 October 1776. An older brother, Karl August, also served under von Knyphausen. Karl Friedrich was taken prisoner when Washington took Trenton on 26 December 1776. As a prisoner of war in Dumfries and Fredericksburg, Virginia, he fraternized with officers of the Revolutionary Army and the people in town. During this time he also made the acquaintance of George Washington. While a prisoner of war, he wrote the poem that he appended to the 1783 pamphlet. According to the title it was written in 1777. It appeals to

the Hessian and other German soldiers to renounce the British cause. I will take up the significance of the poem later. After fifteen months the prisoners of war were exchanged and, back in New York, Führer claims that he tried to resign his commission but that he was refused. He did, though, obtain a certificate to the effect that he had served with honor. In August of 1778 he and a fellow officer, Karl Wilhelm Kleinschmidt, left New York for Philadelphia where on the 26th of that month they wrote to the Continental Congress that they had deserted. They proposed in gratitude for the friendship they experienced during their fifteen months as prisoners of war, to raise a corps consisting of deserters from the German troops in America. But the proposal, which had Washington's approval, failed as did a second such proposal, dated 19 November 1778. On 17 December 1778, still in Philadelphia, they issued a statement justifying the decision to resign their commission in the Hessian service. They claim that they had done so to Lieutenant General von Knyphausen on the 5th of June of that year. The statement was printed in the *Pennsylvania Packet* of 24 December 1778. The criticism of Friedrich II, Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel, found in the statement, was repeated, in very much enlarged form, in *Wahrheit und Guter Rath*. Führer and Kleinschmidt also composed appeals addressed to the German soldiers fighting for the British to change sides. It appears that in 1779 Kleinschmidt hoped to be reinstated, claiming that Führer had not told him that Knyphausen had set a time for them to give themselves up and that Führer had swindled him out of money. But Knyphausen did not accept Kleinschmidt's plea for reinstatement. Führer and Kleinschmidt were hanged in effigy on the gallows in New York and Fort Mifflin according to the *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* of 8 October 1781. Führer's property in Germany was confiscated. Kleinschmidt tried to rejoin the Hessian forces at Yorktown, but that is the last time his name appears in any record and it can be assumed he cannot be the author of the 1783 pamphlet.

Knyphausen and other Hessian officers saw Führer's heavy debts as the cause for his desertion. I do not agree with this explanation and will give my reason below. After assignments in various units, Führer was appointed by Governor Jefferson to serve in the Virginia Line in 1779. With the rank of captain he participated in the Southern Campaign and was seriously injured when he fell off his horse. Back in Philadelphia,

in financial straits, he petitioned Congress for help on 15 November 1781. *Wahrheit und Guter Rath* was published in Philadelphia in 1783. The fact that there are two printings of the pamphlet in that year, one of which incorporates the author's corrections, makes it probable that he must have lived in or near Philadelphia. Thus, the circumstantial evidence points to Führer to having written the pamphlet. His education in Germany, his stay in Dumfries and Fredericksburg while a prisoner of war who was well received in social circles there, and his getting to know Washington personally—there are two passages in the pamphlet praising Washington (pp. 26-27 and 44)—also point to Führer as the author.

The two most often mentioned cases of desertion from the Hessian regiments during the first years in America were those of Führer and Kleinschmidt. The latter can be disregarded as the author of the 1783 pamphlet because of his wavering in loyalty to his fatherland, Hesse-Kassel. Führer, on the other hand, was determined to make America his new home. That commitment to the American cause is already reflected in the poem, dated 1777, and included at the end of the pamphlet. The author says that he has been in America for over seven years (p. 21). Führer arrived in New York City on 18 October 1776. The pamphlet was printed after 28 October 1783, the date of the advertisement in the *Gemeinnützige Philadelphische Correspondenz* in which it is stated that *Wahrheit und Guter Rath* would be available in a few days (see Preface). Thus, Führer had indeed been in America for over seven years when the pamphlet appeared. Führer wrote the 1777 poem when he was a prisoner of war. He claims that it was written by an American "Grenadier," clearly a fictitious attribution. Calling himself an American at this time means that in his mind he has already left the Hessian service and that he is anticipating fighting for the Revolutionaries. In the poem he condemns the Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel in the strongest terms and exhorts the Germans fighting on the British side to come over to join the Americans in their battle for independence. The call to the Hessians and other Germans to remember the glorious deeds of Arminius and to join the cause of freedom and the fight against tyranny is patterned on words and sentiments found in the verses of some of the poets of the Göttinger Hain. They profess again and again that they hate tyrants and, on the other hand, talk about a "Freundschaftsmahl" (p. 46; friendship meal)

that they want to share with those who feel the way they do. The poets of the Göttinger Hain—Göttingen being the Hessian university not far from Führer's home—were active exactly during the years preceding his departure for America. As a young man Führer was undoubtedly an admirer of those poets and their ideas. And while their stance was primarily a rhetorical one, he made the hatred of tyrants and the call for freedom his own, even before leaving his native Hesse-Kassel. The seeds of what he was to do after his capture at Trenton had thus been planted before coming to America. In 1777 he still remembered the words and phrases of the poets of the Göttinger Hain and used them to further the American cause and to try to woo the German soldiers fighting for the British to join the Revolutionaries. Since Führer could not have absorbed the call for freedom and the defeat of tyranny found in the poetry of the Göttinger Hain after leaving his native Hesse-Kassel, the poem in *Wahrheit und Guter Rath* constitutes the best evidence against the claim that his debts made him defect and go over to the American side.

In 1777 Führer also read Mirabeau's pamphlet since both the poem of that year and Mirabeau's pamphlet, published also in 1777, use similar titles: both address the Hessians and other Germans. Also both Mirabeau and Führer remind the Hessians and other Germans—as the poets of the Göttinger Hain had done—of their freedom-loving ancestors. He might also have read at that time Thomas Paine's immensely popular *Common Sense* (1776) which Congress had had translated into German immediately. There are echoes of *Common Sense* in *Wahrheit und Guter Rath* as I will point out in the notes.

In 1783 Führer, who now called himself Charles Fierer, became an original member of The Society of the Cincinnati in Virginia, an organization of officers of the Continental Army and their descendants that still exists today. Führer was installed as Worshipful Master of the Masonic Lodge no. 9 of Maryland in 1789. He printed two newspapers, one in Georgetown, the other in Dumfries, both being the first ones in their localities. He was given a pension and 2,000 acres of land for military services performed in the Virginia Line. On 9 December 1794 Führer died in Dumfries.

One aspect of the text of the pamphlet deserves closer attention with regard to the position of the author who states repeatedly that he has been a Hessian. As such it is natural that he would have close ties to

his country of birth and to some of the former comrades. Repeatedly he uses the phrase "bey uns" (back home; pp. 20, 21 22, 23, 28), meaning in Hesse-Kassel. He says he is writing out of love for his compatriots (p. 3) and addresses the Hessians as "meine[n] Brüder=Soldaten" (my fellow soldiers; p. 17) and as "meine lieben Landsleute" (my beloved compatriots; p. 41). Finally, he signs his appeal as "euer Landsmann und bester Freund" (your countryman and best friend; p. 42). One could argue that such phrases are purely rhetorical. After all, the author uses, as I will show below, a number of rhetorical devices to enhance his arguments. Still, one must realize that Führer left his parents and siblings back home and that one of his brothers, serving in the same regiment in which Führer had served, stayed with the Hessian troops. I do not think that Führer's decision to change sides was an easy one. Therefore, I believe that he was sincere in his expressions of love and concern for his former comrades. But he is also furious at them for not seeing the truth and for not coming over to the side he has embraced. He chides them for their blindness and calls them enslaved subjects who should be ashamed of their trying to make other people become slaves, too (pp. 40 and 43). Such a divided attitude toward his former comrades and compatriots makes the pamphlet a personal statement that rings true.

At this point it will be best to summarize the arguments that support my thesis that Führer is the author of *Wahrheit und Guter Rath*. On the basis of a comparison between the vocabulary and the ideas found in the 1777 poem and the rest of the text of the pamphlet, we know that both were written by the same author. He was obviously a well educated Hessian officer who must have defected during the first years of his stay in America, since already in 1777 he expressed his hatred of the Landgrave and encouraged his former comrades to come over to the Revolutionaries. Only two Hessian officers of note defected at that early time, Führer and Kleinschmidt. They issued a statement justifying their decision to resign their commissions and wrote appeals in connection with their attempt to form a "German Volunteer" corps; in both the statement and the appeals they used language and ideas that are also found in the poem and the prose text of the 1783 pamphlet. Kleinschmidt can be eliminated as a potential author of the pamphlet since he later regretted the decision to have defected and since he tried to get back to the Hessian forces. This leaves only Führer to have written



*Wahrheit und Guter Rath*. Only he had the information, ability, and the motivation to have authored this impassioned condemnation of his former sovereign and praise of his new fatherland.

### Structure and Contents

Since I believe that the evidence points to Führer as having written *Wahrheit und Guter Rath*, I will from now on use his name as the author.

A comparison of Mirabeau's 1777 title page with that of the 1783 pamphlet also shows that both use a motto, Mirabeau one from Virgil's *Aeneid* which tells the German soldiers that they will bring upon themselves their own destruction. Führer chooses a biblical quotation for his motto to justify his advice to the Hessians and his courage to tell the truth. There are, especially in the early part of *Wahrheit und Guter Rath*, a number of references to the Bible. Clearly, the author wanted to anchor his arguments in scriptural authority. At the same time, he will, later on, praise the religious freedom enjoyed by the Americans (p. 25).

Another look at the German title reveals a curious discrepancy between its message and the central message of the pamphlet. The title is directed at the inhabitants of Hesse and Germany in general, while in the main part of the text the author addresses the Hessian soldiers who are still in New York. It could be that the text was written first, then the title, and that Führer knew that there was not much chance to persuade the dwindling number of Hessian soldiers in New York to defect. Therefore he must have chosen a title that addressed all Hessians and Germans in the hope that the pamphlet would be taken back to Germany and be effective there as an encouragement to emigrate to America.

While Mirabeau presents his case in an uninterrupted emotional appeal, Führer follows a carefully outlined structure. He begins with a preamble in which he elaborates on the ideas contained in the motto on the title page (p. 5). He then apologizes for not writing a learned treatise, claiming that he is in a tent and that he is writing for people of common sense, not for the learned. The structure of the pamphlet, its style, the long, in all probability spurious quotation from the "Baron von T.," and the poem at the end belie the author's claim that he is not a learned man. The many facts presented in various parts of the pamphlet point to a long period of collecting information. The argument proper starts

with a condemnation of the luxurious life style of German princes at the expense of the poor population (pp. 6-17). To buttress his point Führer introduces a long passage, supposedly written by a "Baron von T." In the passage the claim is made that the German princes purposefully keep their subjects ignorant. The passage also includes the "Pfaffen" (a derogatory term for clerics) in the list of people for whom the poor farmer has to work. In the text following the quotation, Führer expands that indictment by condemning the clergy in general as being part of the Landgrave's regime. The fact that the clergy sides with the authorities the author explains as being caused by economic self-interest: They are ultimately dependent on the Landgrave for their subsistence. In a second section of the argument proper Führer addresses the issue of the oath the soldiers had to swear to their sovereign and to George II (pp. 17-20). He declares that the oath is invalid since it was forced upon them and since they were sold.

Führer then proceeds to enumerate the many advantages America has to offer, contrasting the freedom enjoyed in America with the enslavement of people in Germany (pp. 20-26). The emphatic repetition of "Hier . . . Hier . . . Hier" serves to strengthen his argument. In the center of the pamphlet we find a eulogy to Washington, followed by the generous offer Congress made to those who desert the British army (pp. 26-29). After an account of how the Hessian troops were traded to England and transported to America, the author describes the plight awaiting the returning veterans (pp. 29-38). In the concluding sixth section of the argument proper Führer reminds his former compatriots of the atrocity committed by their Landgrave when he sold them to the King of England and tells them of the inhuman conditions prevailing among the less fortunate in Hesse-Kassel (pp. 38-41). The pamphlet proper closes with an appeal to the Hessians and with the wish that God will give them his blessing (pp. 41-42).

It would seem that two factors made Führer append the "Auszug eines Lieds, von einem Americanischen Grenadier, an die Hessen und andere. Im Jahr 1777" (Excerpt from a song by an American Grenadier, to the Hessians and others. In the year 1777; pp. 43-46). For one, the poem expresses many of the same thoughts as the rest of the text. Again, Washington's praise is put in the center. Then there is also the patriotic appeal in which the figure of Hermann (Arminius) is invoked. Additional

aspects of the poem agree with the language and the sentiments of the poets of the Göttinger Hain. I take Führer to have identified with the patriotic stance of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724-1803), Germany's most celebrated poet at the time. Klopstock became the idol of the members of the Göttinger Hain. Patriotism was associated with "Tyrannenhass" (hatred of tyrants) in a rather rhetorical fashion by several members of the group, especially by Friedrich Georg Graf von Stolberg (1750-1819). In the poem and in the rest of the pamphlet Führer identifies the tyrants with Friedrich II, Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel, and George III. A second factor that made Führer include the poem was to show that he not only embraced the ideals of the American Revolution but that he was also a poet.

Finally, there is the postscript concerning land in South Carolina, available to those soldiers who come over to the American side.

### Language and Style

The pamphlet is written in the standard language of the educated. At the same time, Führer does not shy away from using such colloquialisms as "Sacramenter," "Taugenichts" (son of a gun, good for nothing; both p. 32) and "schnurstracks" (straight away; p. 39). The word "Canton" (draft district; p. 34) indicates that he was familiar with current recruitment practices in Hesse-Kassel. The term had been used first in Prussia, then in Hesse-Kassel. The American scene explains the reference to a "sogenantes Blockhaus" (so-called blockhouse; p. 28) as something a settler could build within a year. Up to the eighteenth century "Blockhaus" meant a structure for defensive purposes. Führer is aware of grammatical correctness when he emends in what I take to be the first issue of the pamphlet "zu . . . nöthigen Hausrath" to read "zu . . . nöthigem Hauerath" (necessary household items; p. 27) in the second. Also, he corrects "dem armen Unterthan das Geld, und die Früchte ihrer sauren Arbeit" in the first issue to read ". . . seiner sauren Arbeit" (his hard work; p. 9) in the second. Certain constructions that seem today to be incorrect can be explained historically. Thus, "welche . . . das Mitleid bedürftig sind" (who are . . . in need of compassion; p. 5) was still possible in the eighteenth century. More interesting are the various rhetorical devices found in the text. At the beginning there is

the modesty formula "Ich bin, leider! kein Gelehrter" (I am, unfortunately, not a scholar; p. 3). The author claims that he has much more to say than what he can state within the space of "dieser wenigen Blätter" (these few leaves; p. 41), when the pamphlet is by far the longest of all the appeals directed at the Hessian soldiers. He also uses rhetorical questions as when he asks "verdienen solche, sage ich, Menschen zu seyn oder zu heissen?" (do they, I say, deserve to be human beings or to be called that? p. 38), only to answer "Nein! vielmehr würde das Affengeschlecht diesen Namen verdienen" (No! rather apes would deserve this name: p. 38). Finally, there is the use of anaphora to which I have already referred when within seven consecutive pages he repeats "Hier" seven times at the beginning of a sentence and inside one sentence three times more (pp. 20-26). This section of the pamphlet is an example of the black and white type of presenting an argument where in this case black is identified with everything connected with the Landgrave and white with America. Pure exaggeration is also found in the assertion that in America almost every inhabitant has a harbor in front of his door, an assertion that finds its correction a few pages later with the phrase "wenn Flüsse oder Seen nahe sind" (if there are rivers or lakes nearby; pp. 24 and 28). Equally exaggerated is the statement that the Revolutionaries were fighting war against more than a dozen nations (p. 26).

To make his attack on the Landgrave even more biting, Führer uses in one instance a play on words. When talking about the miserable pension discharged veterans receive, he says that people call that "eine fürstliche Gnade" and then makes the comment: "Gott behüte einen jeden davor in Gnaden!" (a royal act of grace . . . May God graciously protect everyone from this; p. 33). Later on he refers to the fact that the Landgrave calls himself "Vater seines Volkes" (*Father of his people*) and then "binds his child's hands, leads the child personally to the slaughtering bench and calmly watches as the child's throat is cut" (pp. 40-41).

Thus, Führer uses facts and exaggerated assertions as well as a variety of rhetorical devices to persuade the remaining Hessian soldiers to defect and to stay in America.