

The German Contribution to the American Revolution

By Don Heinrich Tolzmann

The German contribution to the American Revolution is a fascinating topic, but one probably not that well known with the general public. If asked about it, most would likely respond by mentioning the Hessians, others possibly Baron von Steuben, but that is perhaps all that most people would know. Since these two topics, the Hessians and von Steuben, are the ones usually mentioned, it is best to begin with them by way of introduction to a survey of the German contribution to the American Revolution. (1)

The German contingent on both sides of the conflict was substantial, but perhaps best known are the Germans who served with the British forces, the Hessians. Altogether there were about 30,000 of them and they constituted roughly one-third of the British forces in America at that time. Although generally referred to as Hessians, not all of them were actually Hessians, but included many from neighboring principalities in the region. After the war, only half of them returned home and it is estimated that at least one-fourth survived the war and settled in the U.S. The Hessians themselves are even today misunderstood and were negatively portrayed in schoolbooks, especially in the 19th century. Rarely mentioned is the fact that their desertion rate was high, as they were mercenaries and their enthusiasm for the war most likely was minimal. Nevertheless, they cannot be viewed as a German contribution to the Revolution, as they were on the British side, except, of course, for those that deserted over to the American side. (2)

In addition to the Hessians, Baron von Steuben is often mentioned when reference is made to the topic of Germans in the American Revolution. Baron von

Steuben played a major role as Inspector-General of the Continental Army. A veteran of the Seven Years War in Europe and a favorite of Frederick the Great, he imported Prussian military science and applied it to the American scene. There is no question that without the discipline and economy, the knowledge of the elements of drill, maneuvering and campaigning, which von Steuben infused into the army, that the winning of American independence would have been more than difficult. His military manual, *Regulations for the Order and Disciplines of the Troops of the United States*, commonly called von Steuben's manual, reflected his military education and experience, which he applied to the training of the American Revolutionary forces. Moreover, his manual was used at West Point, the military academy he had proposed be created, and was used there well into the first half of the 19th century. (3)

In addition to Baron von Steuben, there were two other Germans who held important positions in the Continental Army. However, they are not as well known: Christopher Ludwig and Heinrich von Lutterloh.

Christopher Ludwig was a German baker from Philadelphia who was appointed Superintendent and Director of Baking for the entire army by Congress. He basically was responsible for supplying bread, the so-called "staff of life," for the troops. He remarked: "I do not wish to get rich by the war. I will make 135 pounds of bread out of the 100 pounds of flour," and once he and his assistants baked six thousand loaves in a day. Washington called him an "honest friend," and often toasted him by saying: "Health and long life to Christopher Ludwig and wife." Ludwig commented on Hessian captives by saying: "Bring

the captives to Philadelphia, show them our beautiful German churches. They should also visit the homes in the area and eat a meal with a family." After this, they should be sent back to their camp, noting that: "you will see how many will come over to us." (4)

Heinrich Lutterloh was appointed Quartermaster-General of the Continental Army and was responsible for quartering and supplying the troops of the army. A former officer with the guard of the Duke of Brunswick, he had been encouraged to come to America by Benjamin Franklin and was highly thought of by Washington. (5) Taken together then, we can say that three Germans (von Steuben, Ludwig, and Lutterloh) had some crucial responsibilities: They trained, fed, supplied and quartered the troops.

There were many other German officers, both German- and American-born. Peter Muhlenberg, the son of Heinrich Muhlenberg, the patriarch of the Lutheran church in America, rose to the rank of brigadier-general. A Lutheran minister in Virginia well known for his eloquence, he preached his last sermon in 1776, declaring from the pulpit: "There is a time for preaching and praying, but also a time for battle and that time has now arrived." (6)

In 1777, when General Burgoyne marched with his forces from Canada with the goal of cutting New England off from the rest of the colonies, he was stopped and defeated at the Battle of Oriskany. There he met a force of New York Germans from the Mohawk Valley under the command of General Nicholas Herkimer, who perished soon after the battle from wounds he had incurred. The battle had been a decisive one, causing Washington to say: "It was Herkimer, who first reversed the gloomy scene...He served for love of country, not reward. He did not want a Continental command or money." (7)

This is reminiscent of another officer of note, Baron De Kalb, who came to America with Lafayette and died from wounds suffered at the Battle of Camden. On the battlefield he said: "I am dying for a country fighting for justice and liberty." (8)

Aside from these officers there are the many Germans who fought in the ranks of the Continental Army. Here it should be noted that the colonial German element was concentrated in Pennsylvania and surrounding colonies, so to a great extent we are speaking here of the Pennsylvania Germans and Germans from nearby colonies, such as New York, Virginia, and Maryland, for example. Why was their service critical to the Revolution? John Adams is said to have remarked that one-third of the population consisted of Tories. This gave rise to the generally well accepted formula that when it came to the

Revolution, one-third of the population was against it, one-third was for it, and one-third was neutral.

The Revolution was a real conflict for Anglo-Americans, as it meant a break with the mother country. This was not the case for colonial Germans, as Britain was not their mother country. Here the one-third formula does not hold true. Of the colonial German element, the only segment to oppose the war consisted of sectarians, such as the Amish and Mennonites, which was only ten percent of the German element. At the time, the major German religious denominations, the Lutheran and the Reformed churches, strongly supported the Revolution.

In short, the colonial German element takes on greater importance due to the fact that it responded to the Revolution in a different way than did the Anglo-American. A good example here is the family of Benjamin Franklin. He became permanently estranged from his Loyalist son, William, who sailed off to Britain with British troops after the war. Such a conflict did not take place in colonial German families. (9)

In 1776, a German regiment was formed by the Continental Congress and consisted mainly of Pennsylvania and Maryland Germans. Washington commented on this regiment, stating that this unit "of Germans which Congress has ordered to be raised will be a corps of much service, and I am hopeful that such persons will be appointed officers as will complete their enlistments with all possible expedition." (10)

There were many other German military units, too numerous to mention here, but they all reflect the extent of German support for the Revolution. For example, in Berks County, Pennsylvania one unit wore the badge "Liberty or Death." And, in Reading, Pennsylvania a Company of Old Men was formed, consisting of eighty soldiers. The commander and drummer were both over eighty. (11)

Of particular note with regard to German units was the Independent Troop of the Horse. It provided bodyguard service for Washington and was formed as a result of a plot against his life. His previous bodyguards were Tories and planned to capture Washington and turn him over to the British. Had he ever been captured, or assassinated the course of the war would have been gravely affected. This unit was the last Continental Army unit mustered out of service, as it accompanied Washington to his home at the end of the Revolution. It was an all-German unit consisting of fifty-three men and fourteen officers under the command of Bartholomaeus von Heer. (12)

Another factor not generally known is that more than one-third of the 6,000 French allied troops sent to America

to support the Revolution were German. Two of the six regiments were German: the Royal German Regiment Zweibrücken, or Deux-Ponts and Lauzun's Legion. In addition to these two regiments, Germans could be found scattered in the other French regiments as well. (13)

Did it ever happen that Germans in the Continental Army might face Hessian troops on the other side? Yes, it did happen and they often shouted out to them, encouraging them to desert the service of the British. Colonial Germans also printed handbills, calling on the German mercenaries to desert the British. (14).

After the war, veterans of the Revolution helped settle the West. Many of them received land grants and pensions in reward for their service and when the Northwest and Southwest Territories were opened for settlement, large numbers of former soldiers moved into them. On both sides of the Ohio River lands were opened up for settlement. Many Germans from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia moved into Kentucky, for example. In western Kentucky, there is even a Muhlenberg County that was settled by soldiers who had served with General Muhlenberg of Virginia. North of the Ohio River many came west as well, including soldiers stationed at the military forts on the frontier. (15)

In the Greater Cincinnati area, the most prominent of them was Major David Ziegler, who had been sent west with a regiment consisting of Pennsylvania Germans to protect the frontier forts in the Ohio Valley. Eventually he was stationed at Fort Washington in Cincinnati, a settlement named for the organization of Revolutionary War veterans, the Society of the Cincinnati. In 1802, he was elected the first mayor of Cincinnati, his actual title being that of chief magistrate. A plaque in his honor was placed at Memorial Hall in the Over-the-Rhine district by the German-American Citizens League of Greater Cincinnati. (16)

Another well-known veteran was Christian Waldschmidt, who served in a Pennsylvania German regiment and whose home is now maintained as a museum by the Ohio Daughters of the American Revolution. This was part of a settlement Waldschmidt established in 1795-96 that was known as Germany and which later served in the Civil War as Camp Denison. (17)

Aside from Ziegler and Waldschmidt, there was another noteworthy Revolutionary War veteran in the region. This was Ludwig (Lewis) Boyer, who had a farm near Piqua, Ohio, and died in 1843 at the age of eighty-three. He was the last surviving member of the Independent Troop of the Horse. On Boyer's gravestone it states that: "He was a soldier of the American Revolution,

and by the side of the great Washington fought many a hard battle for his Country's independence, served as a life guard to the Commander in Chief during the war, and was honorably discharged Dec. 10, 1783 by special certificate signed by Gen. Washington." This is followed by an epitaph that might well stand for all of the colonial Germans who fought on behalf of American Independence:

Here Boyer lies, who Britain's arms withstood
Not for himself but for his Country's good.
The victor oft in famed Columbia's fields,
To death's repose the aged warrior yields. (18)

Notes

1. For a history of the topic, see: Henry Melchior Muhlenberg Richards, *German-Americans in the American Revolution: Henry Melchior Muhlenberg Richards' History*. Edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann. (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc., 1992). Also, see: Rudolf Cronau, *German Achievements in America: Rudolf Cronau's Survey History*. Edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann. (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc., 1995).
2. Regarding the Hessians, see: Edward J. Lowell, *The Hessians and other German Auxiliaries of Great Britain in the Revolutionary War*. (1884 rpt., Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1965); Max von Eelking, *The German Allied Troops in the North American War of Independence, 1776-1783*. Translated by J. G. Rosengarten. (Albany, New York: Josel Munsell's Sons, Publishers, 1893) Rodney Atwood, *The Hessians: Mercenaries from Hessen-Kassel in the American Revolution*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and: J.G. Rosengarten, *German Allied Troops in the American Revolution: J.R. Rosengarten's Survey of German Archives and Sources*. Edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann. (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc., 1993). Bruce E. Burgoyne has also edited a number of works dealing with the Hessians. For example, see: Johann Conrad Döhla, *A Hessian Diary of the American Revolution*. Translated, edited, and with an Introduction by Bruce E. Burgoyne. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990).
3. Of the several biographies of von Steuben that are available, see the following: Friedrich Kapp, *Life of Frederick William von Steuben*. (New York: Mason,

- 1859); John McAuley Palmer, *General von Steuben*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937); Rudolf Cronau, *The Army of the American Revolution and its Organizer: Rudolf von Cronau's Biography of Baron von Steuben*. Edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann. (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc., 1998); and: Paul Douglas Lockhart, *The Drillmaster of Valley Forge: The Baron de Steuben and the Making of the American Army*. (New York: Harper Paperback, 2010).
4. See: Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *The German-American Experience*. Revised and expanded edition of Theodore Huebener's *The Germans in America*. (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), pp. 99, 111.
 5. *Ibid*, p. 107.
 6. *Ibid*, p. 97. For a biography of Muhlenberg, see: Edward W. Hocker, *The Fighting Parson of the American Revolution: A Biography of General Peter Muhlenberg, Lutheran Clergyman, Military Chieftain and Political Leader*. (Philadelphia: The Author, 1936).
 7. *Ibid*, p. 100.
 8. See: Cronau, *German Achievements*, p. 52. Among the biographies of De Kalb, one of the best is: Friedrich Kapp, *The Life of John Kalb: Major-General in the Revolutionary Army*. (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1884).
 9. Regarding Benjamin Franklin, see: Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).
 10. See: Tolzmann, *German-American Experience*, pp. 100-01.
 11. *Ibid*, p. 101.
 12. Regarding the Independent Troop of the Horse, see: H.A. Rattermann, "Washington's Bodyguard, translated by John Terence Golden," *The Palatine Immigrant*. 18:3(1993): 130-35. Also see: Byron L. Reppert, "George Washington's Bodyguard: Additional Information," *The Palatine Immigrant*. 18:4(1993): 188-92. Also, see the following article by Reppert, "German Patriots from Berks County," *Historical Review of Berks County*. (Summer 1995): 132-36, and: Arthur Graeff, "Washington's Bodyguard," in: Arthur Graeff, "Selections from Arthur Graeff's Scholla, with An Introduction by Larry M. Neff," *Publications of the Pennsylvania German Society*. 5(1971): 153-54.
 13. Regarding the French allied troops, see: Rosengarten, *German Allied Troops in the American Revolution: J.G. Rosengarten's Survey of German Archives and Sources*, pp. 32-36 and: H.A. Rattermann, *A German Regiment among the French Auxiliary Troops of the American Revolutionary War: H.A. Rattermann's History*. Edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann. (Baltimore, Maryland: Clearfield Publishing Co., 2002).
 14. In August 1776, Congress issued a German-language broadside that called on the German allied troops to drop their arms, accept American citizenship and find a new home "where they may live in happiness and peace rather than face death on the battlefield." It also attached the British Parliament and the German princes "who sell people's blood for money." This appeal "found resonance among the Hessians, who were not fighting for their own cause, and many a soldier became a farmer within or near a German-American settlement." See: Karl J.R. Arndt and May E. Olson, *The German Language Press of the Americas: Volume 3: German-American Press Research from the American Revolution to the Bicentennial*. München: Verlag Dokumentation, 1976, pp. 50ff.
 15. Regarding the German veterans of the American Revolution, who settled in Kentucky, see: H.A. Rattermann, *Kentucky's German Pioneers: H.A. Rattermann's History*. Translated and edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann. (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc., 2001).
 16. For a biography of Ziegler, see: George A. Katzenberger, *The First Mayor of Cincinnati: George A. Katzenberger's Biography of Mayor David Ziegler*. Edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann. (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1990).
 17. For further information about Waldschmidt, see: Doris Penrod, *Waldschmidt: House and Family 1804*. (Cincinnati: Capozzolo Printers, Inc., 1997).
 18. Regarding Boyer, see: Rattermann, "Washington's Bodyguard." Boyer, whose discharge paper was signed by Washington, received a land grant and a pension as a veteran of the Revolution and settled in Miami County, Ohio. He is buried in the Wesley Chapel Cemetery on Brown Road in Shelby County, Ohio. . According to Cronau, Boyer was the oldest surviving member of the unit at the time of his death. See: Cronau, *The Army of the American Revolution and its Organizer: Rudolf Cronau's Biography of Baron von Steuben*, p. 108.