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Daniel Krebs, *A Generous and Merciful Enemy: Life for German Prisoners of War during the American Revolution*. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2013. Pp. xv, 376. ISBN 978-0-8061-4356-9.

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In *A Generous and Merciful Enemy*, Daniel Krebs (Univ. of Louisville) sheds new light on a sorely neglected subject—the lives of German prisoners of war (POWs) during the American Revolution. Better known as Hessians, these mercenary soldiers in the British army actually hailed from the German principalities of Anhalt-Zerbst, Ansbach-Bayreuth, Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, Hessen-Hanau, Hessen-Kassel, and Waldeck. At various times in the war, they constituted as much as a third of the British army, numbering about thirty-seven thousand men. Thousands were taken prisoner during the conflict. Krebs brings their stories to life and dispels several myths in this well-crafted book, featuring tables, maps, illustrations, and an appendix.

Krebs skillfully taps a wealth of primary material from over a dozen German archives to individualize his subjects and explore their motivations for enlisting. While some men were seasoned veterans, others were draftees; some volunteered to escape unemployment and better their lives socially and economically or simply to seek adventure. Many sent their families a portion of their pay. Few were victims of greedy tyrants who wallowed in luxury while their subjects fought and died in a distant land. In fact, Krebs shows that some German princes were actively concerned about their soldiers serving in America and sought to help those who became POWs. Some sovereigns devoted the funds acquired by providing troops to the British to improving living conditions in their realms. Krebs eschews the term “mercenaries” as anachronistic (the designation emerged during and after the American Revolution) and because of its negative connotations; he prefers the more accurate and nuanced “auxiliaries.”

German auxiliary soldiers taken as POWs found themselves in the hands of people unready to care for them. Both Congress and the states, lacking any predetermined plan, addressed the situation strictly on an ad hoc basis. Krebs sums up the muddled and evolving POW situation this way:

The American War of Independence was not led by a strong central authority with sufficient power to direct and implement policies on the state, regional, and local level. The situation was often chaotic, and Congress was frequently powerless and repeatedly ignored. General Washington often disagreed with Congress, particularly over prisoner-of-war policies. His focus in 1775 was to make the British accept the revolutionaries as legitimate belligerents and treat them as such when in British hands, threatening retaliation if necessary. Once American forces took more British and German soldiers, additional revolutionary authorities and institutions began dealing with prisoner affairs. In 1777, for instance, Congress, the Board of War, Washington, and the commissary general of prisoners and his deputies attempted to manage prisoner affairs. The various states and towns where the captives were housed still pursued their own agendas. Confusion and competition rather than structure and planning often governed American prisoner-of-war treatment.

One pattern, however, remained prevalent throughout the war. Revolutionaries on all levels saw prisoners of war not only as a burden—more mouths to feed, more bodies to supply, guard, and house—but also as useful enemies. British and German captives consumed resources, but they could also be utilized for purposes far beyond exchanges and cartels. Primarily that meant using the captives for labor, particularly in and around major prisoner-of-war camps such as those at Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Frederick, Maryland; and Winchester and Charlottesville, Virginia. This way, the revolutionaries lowered their expenses and benefitted from their captives. Congress even hired out prisoners of war in lieu of payment for ammunition and other supplies for the war effort. For their part, the prisoners earned extra money for food and clothing and could escape their cramped and inadequate quarters. Common soldiers had little problem being “used,” as long as such usefulness also held advantages for them.

Hiring out prisoners of war, however, also meant that captivity became increasingly privatized. Local citizens, furnaces, mills, farmers, shopkeepers, and craftsmen, rather than states or Congress, kept German and British prisoners of war. It seems that Congress, the states, and the Continental Army were able to hold so many captives for such a long time only because they could hire them out and did not have to detain them closely in camps. (119–20)

Congress was slow to provide guidance regarding POWs and state and local governments often ignored its directives in any case. Nor did the warring parties have any agreement for the exchange of captives. Indeed, the very concept of “prisoner of war” had yet to be precisely defined.

Krebs notes that, while individual experiences varied, most prisoners suffered hardship and privation. Some American captors, however, provided willing German soldiers a chance to live with civilian families and work for merchants or shopkeepers in return for food, clothing, shelter, and wages. Those with appropriate skills were employed as barbers, blacksmiths, butchers, carpenters, cloth-makers, gunsmiths, joiners, leather workers, masons, painters, tailor, wagoners, and weavers. Even unskilled men could at least work as day laborers and farmhands.

Not all German POWs, however, were willing to work; Krebs writes that some men preferred to remain in their camps or jails, while protesting their shoddy care in confinement. Eventually, Congress tried to entice them to enlist in the Continental Army with promises of generous bounties and citizenship, but few were interested in such a deal. Those who were (or said they were) may have seen possibilities for better treatment. A legion of “Hessian” volunteers fighting for the cause of American independence from the British would have been a major propaganda coup for the young nation, but, Krebs shows, efforts in this direction gained no traction, thanks to congressional indecision and German indifference. Despite the powerful allure of bounties, gainful employment, and American freedoms, about two-thirds of the German POWs decided to return home rather than stay.

Krebs’s use of statistics is sometimes problematic. For example, he cites desertion percentages for a single German regiment or company or encampment. Well and good. But such small samples are no compelling basis for his further generalizations about tens of thousands of Germans in British service. The author himself admits that the numbers he had to work with are not always accurate: American, British, and German counts of German POWs vary, and British estimates of numbers for their auxiliary troops are unreliable. Further, it is often unclear whether the statistics Krebs cites refer to German POWs as a whole or to a group of regiments, single regiments, men from one principality, one company, or one set of detainees at one particular camp. In short, the numbers too often obscure rather than clarify matters.¹

However thought-provoking, Krebs’s book frustrates by leaving a number of pertinent questions unanswered. Might, for example, local church records contain information about German POWs? How many of them married local women? Did they marry German-Americans? Do the names of any who deserted or stayed appear later in tax records? How many were employed in the community? Did deserters take oaths to state governments or the United States in the postwar period? If so, how many? Did German women and children who were part of the POW contingent return home or stay in the United States? What work did they perform for Americans? How many of the women had children by POWs? Have graves of those who died in captivity been identified? Were the remains later moved? And what might be revealed by a more detailed comparison with the experience of Germans captured by the Spanish in the war?

A Generous and Merciful Enemy is a solid piece of scholarship on both the American Revolution and the plight of German prisoners. It debunks half-truths and hoary stereotypes about British “Hessian” units (and later POWs). These men, Krebs demonstrates, had a lasting impact on American history despite their marginalization in the war and their having fought for the losing “side.” One hopes this study of how their experiences laid the groundwork for a better international understanding of the proper treatment of POWs will inspire other historians to follow Krebs’s lead.

1. Less substantive but annoying problems include inconsistent spelling out of numerals, avoidance of the handy acronym “POW,” and overuse of the phrase “common soldier(s).” One unfortunate typo turns George III into his grandfather.