



PROJECT MUSE®

---

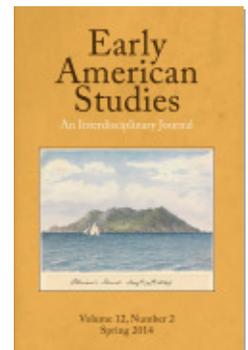
Foreigners in the Highest Trust: American Perceptions of  
European Mercenary Officers in the Continental Army

Eric Spall

Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Volume 12, Number  
2, Spring 2014, pp. 338-365 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/eam.2014.0009>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/544588>

# Foreigners in the Highest Trust: American Perceptions of European Mercenary Officers in the Continental Army

ERIC SPALL  
*Ball State University*

**ABSTRACT** Although the American Revolution began as a British civil war, it quickly ballooned into an international conflict that included Germany, France, and Spain. Britain initiated the internationalization of the Revolution by contracting with German auxiliary units. As one of the grievances in the Declaration of Independence shows, the rebels considered Britain's employment of foreign mercenaries a heinous act, and Revolutionary propagandists used the presence of these mercenaries to differentiate between British tyranny and American liberty. Though most historians acknowledge the presence of European officers and troops in the Continental Army, few historians recognize these soldiers as mercenaries, despite the fact that they fit the pattern of eighteenth-century European mercenary practice. This essay will show that, although Revolutionary rhetoric declared mercenaries the tools of despots, the Continental Congress accepted many European mercenaries into the American service. Of course, the number of foreign offers, coupled with issues of language and experience, made it difficult for the Continental Army to gainfully employ these soldiers. Furthermore, American suspicions of these foreigners' motivations and loyalties created potentially debilitating tensions within the army. Nonetheless, Congress and the army, portraying these foreigners as volunteers, worked to mitigate these problems and made use of European soldiers of fortune throughout the war.

In many ways a civil war, the American Revolution pitted subjects of the British Crown against each other. In the North American colonies, neighbors fought neighbors as loyal Tories combatted rebel Patriots in a contest

*Early American Studies* (Spring 2014)

Copyright © 2014 The McNeil Center for Early American Studies. All rights reserved.

over the meaning of English rights.<sup>1</sup> The war did not long remain an internal affair, however, for in 1776 Parliament concluded a treaty with Hesse-Kassel for the use of Hessian forces to put down the colonial rebellion. The Revolutionaries perceived Britain's use of foreign mercenaries as proof of the king's despotism. Nonetheless, the American rebels also relied on the support of foreign forces. The Treaties of Alliance and Amity and Commerce, signed in 1778, formally announced France's recognition of American independence and French support for the Revolutionary cause. Even before this alliance between France and the American Revolutionaries, though, a flood of French and other European officers flocked to North America to offer their services to the Revolution, and the Continental Congress accepted many of these men into the army, despite concerns about the extent to which these outsiders could be trusted.

The presence of these foreign military personnel raises a complex question: If the colonists considered Britain's use of mercenaries a form of tyrannical aggression, why would they themselves employ mercenaries? This essay suggests an answer to this riddle by departing from the historiographical consensus on the role of mercenaries in the American Revolution; whereas a number of historians accept at face value American leaders' assertions that the foreign officers in the Continental Army served as "volunteers," reserving the term *mercenary* for Britain's German auxiliaries, this study recognizes those European officers in the American army as adhering to accepted eighteenth-century European military mercenary practice.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. For convenience' sake, in this essay, "American," "Revolutionary," and "colonist" refer to the rebelling American colonists, "British" refers to the Crown's army and government, and "foreigner" refers to any other European. This in no way rejects the presence of the considerable number of American colonists who remained loyal to the British government.

2. For recent studies of the Revolution that do not reflect on the mercenary nature of the foreigners in the rebelling armies, see Robert Middlekauf, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), and David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Fischer's book pertains to the Battle of Trenton (1776), in which German mercenaries played a central role, but he considers neither Americans' perceptions of the principle of using foreign auxiliaries nor how their interaction with foreign mercenaries affected their perceptions of the foreigners in their own army. For historical analyses of European mercenary practice, see Janice E. Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns: State-Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), Sarah Percy, *Mercenaries: The History of a Norm in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and William Urban, *Bayonets for Hire: Mercenaries*

Although the practice of serving with foreign militaries was a long-standing European tradition, the fact that American leaders generally refused to acknowledge their foreign officers as mercenaries suggests that the ideologies out of which the Revolution was born called into question the practice of mercenarism and required Revolutionary leaders to redefine the foreign individuals who served them.

This essay begins with an overview of mercenarism and the nature of the practice in eighteenth-century Europe. It then examines American anti-mercenary attitudes before moving on to an analysis of Americans' interactions with foreigners in their military. Specifically, it focuses on the presence of mercenary European officers in the Continental Army, how they were perceived by American Revolutionaries, and how Americans fit these foreigners into their Revolutionary schema. It shows that, in contrast to the foreigners employed by Britain, whom the Americans considered degenerate hirelings, the foreigners in the American army were clothed in the guise of volunteers by the Revolutionaries.

To begin, it is necessary to define *mercenarism*, which is no easy task, for even today the definition of *mercenary* is ambiguous. Unfortunately, no consensus, legal or otherwise, exists regarding the line between a mercenary and a volunteer soldier. One scholar defines a mercenary as a person who fights for a foreign state in exchange for money but who is not an official member of the armed forces of the hiring state. Janice Thomson states that the word today generally refers to a person who fights for an employer other than the home state for money, and she defines *mercenarism* specifically as the practice of enlisting in a foreign army. In contrast, Sarah Percy argues that motivation defines the mercenary; according to her definition, foreigners who share the same commitment to a cause as those who hire them would not be mercenaries. But does this imply that a native citizen motivated to enlist more by the pay and benefits than patriotism is a mercenary? Even today, this point remains unclear. After all, though it is customary in the United States to perceive members of the armed forces as serving their country out of a sense of duty (which is undoubtedly the case for many servicemen and servicewomen), there is no guarantee that the soldiers of a national army are not also motivated by money. To further complicate matters, the political theorist Cécile Fabre asserts that, while mercenaries are

---

*at War, 1550–1789* (London: Greenhill Books, 2007). Although the European officers in American service tended to fit these authors' definitions of *mercenarism* to varying degrees, none of these scholars recognizes them as such.

generally defined as people fighting in foreign wars for economic reasons, the mercenary need not be motivated primarily by financial gain.<sup>3</sup>

If modern scholars cannot agree on the meaning of *mercenary*, neither could contemporaries of the Revolution achieve a universally accepted definition of mercenarism. In the eighteenth century *mercenary* meant a hireling or wage laborer, or one who worked merely for the sake of a monetary or other reward. Whereas today *mercenary* refers almost exclusively to soldiers, people in the eighteenth century applied the word to a broad spectrum, including professional soldiers, authors who wrote for the sake of pay, and suitors who sought marriages for wealth and status.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, this does not mean that those living in the 1700s considered everyone who received pay mercenary. Rather, contemporaries usually applied the term pejoratively to individuals who would do things that upright citizens would never do. Revealingly, though, some Revolutionary leaders did define citizens who fought more for money than for ideology as mercenaries. George Washington, commanding general of the Continental Army, noted that some Connecticut troops possessed “a dirty mercenary spirit.” In the general’s opinion, such an “Egrigious want of Public Spirit” pervaded his soldiers that he feared “we are likely to be deserted at a most critical time.” Robert Morris, a congressional representative from Pennsylvania, pointedly declared that enlistment bounties and high wages had made American troops “the most mercenary beings that exist.”<sup>5</sup> These statements indicate that American Revolutionaries did not confine the definition of

---

3. Percy, *Mercenaries*, 51, 54; Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns*, 26–27; Tony Lynch and A. J. Walsh, “The Good Mercenary?” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2000): 136; Cécile Fabre, “In Defence of Mercenarism,” *British Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 3 (July 2010): 540–41.

4. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 9, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 618; Erik Simpson, *Mercenaries in British and American Literature, 1790–1830: Writing, Fighting, and Marrying for Money* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), analyzes the myriad uses of the word *mercenary* in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literature.

5. Simpson, *Mercenaries in Literature*, 6; George Washington to Joseph Reed, November 28, 1775, in *The Writings of George Washington*, vol. 4, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931), 124; George Washington to President of Congress, November 28, 1775, in *Writings of George Washington*, 4:121; Robert Morris to George Washington, March 6, 1777, in Paul Hubert Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976–2000), 6:403, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28dg006385%29%29> (accessed March 5, 2012).

*mercenary* to foreigners. On the other hand, the foreign “volunteers” did not offer their services to the United States gratis but expected some kind of compensation.

Though the above definitions do not entirely agree, a common thread connects them: self-interest—being motivated by selfishness and not a shared connection to a cause—characterizes the mercenary. Though foreignness did not necessarily define mercenaries, American Revolutionaries could easily perceive foreign soldiers as acting for their own interests and not the cause of American freedom from Britain.

Great Britain’s decision to hire German mercenaries to quell the rebellion in the North American colonies greatly stressed the Americans’ relations with England and may have hastened the Declaration of Independence. Less than one year after the first shots were fired at Lexington and Concord, the Crown signed treaties with several German principalities for the use of parts of their armies. In the eyes of the Revolutionaries, the British, by employing these mercenaries, proved themselves to be bent on conquest—not reconciliation—which rendered resistance the only option to preserve their liberty. Congress asserted this principle by including the use of mercenaries in its list of grievances against the king published in the Declaration of Independence, proclaiming that “he is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny.”<sup>6</sup> The colonists may have considered the use of foreigners against them a just grievance, but the Crown had often employed mercenaries without complaint from the colonies. Indeed, mercenaries were integral to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European military tradition.

Essential to all modern European wars until the 1790s, the use of mercenaries was an internationally accepted practice by 1776. In the two centuries before the American War for Independence, most European powers had employed mercenaries at one time or another. In particular, Britain had hired German soldiers in all its eighteenth-century wars. By the time of the American Revolution, the practice was so common that British leaders in Parliament saw the hiring of Germans as the natural first step in quelling

---

6. Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography*, 7 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 4:98; Rodney Atwood, *The Hessians: Mercenaries from Hessen-Kassel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1; Melodie Andrews Pogue, “Heroes or Hirelings: American Opinion and Response to the Presence of German Mercenaries during the American Revolution” (M.A. thesis, University of Houston, 1975), 31; “The Declaration of Independence,” [www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html) (accessed June 15, 2012).

the rebellion. In November 1774, five months before the war began, General Thomas Gage, commander in chief of British troops in the Atlantic colonies, advised Secretary at War Lord William Barrington that “foreign troops must be hired” in the event of a rebellion.<sup>7</sup>

The Hessians and other German units employed by Great Britain represented a special type of mercenary known as the auxiliary. Essentially, auxiliaries were professional armies—fully constituted and officered—for lease, and European governments hired them out of convenience. Since auxiliaries remained in a state of perpetual readiness, they could be fielded more quickly than home-grown armies. Furthermore, many European states found it cheaper in the long run to hire auxiliaries than to expend the resources necessary to maintain their own large standing armies. Importantly, the hiring out of auxiliaries did not imply a political or ideological commitment on the part of the lessor to the cause of the lessee; on multiple occasions auxiliary units of one prince fought on opposing sides of the same war. Indeed, Parisian gossip maintained, perhaps facetiously, that, if the Americans had applied to Landgrave Frederick II, prince of Hesse-Kassel, they could have hired just as many Hessians as Great Britain.<sup>8</sup>

Although important, auxiliaries represented only one aspect of European mercenarism. After all, they usually came into play only during wartime. At the time of the Revolution, more prevalent than the hiring of auxiliaries was the practice of employing foreign officers to lead armies. Indeed, by 1700 so many European officers hired themselves out to foreign armies that they practically controlled the soldier’s profession. Rulers actively sought out foreign officers in order to acquire military leaders with the best training and experience and because they deemed foreigners less likely than native

---

7. Pogue, “Heroes or Hirelings,” 1; Atwood, *Hessians*, 22, 23. Philipp Losch, *Soldatenhandel: Mit einem Verzeichnis der Hessen-Kasselischen Subsidienveträge und einer Bibliographie* (Kassel: Bärenreiterdruck Kassel, 1933), Atwood, *Hessians*, and Charles W. Ingrao, *The Hessian Mercenary State: Ideas, Institutions, and Reform under Frederick II, 1760–1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), provide detailed backgrounds to mercenary practices in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century German states; Gage to Barrington, November 2, 1774, quoted in *Paul Revere’s Ride*, by David Hackett Fischer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 381n16.

8. Atwood, *Hessians*, 8, 15; Edward J. Lowell, *The Hessians and the Other German Auxiliaries of Great Britain in the Revolutionary War* (Williamstown, Mass.: Corner House Publishers, 1970), 28, 2; John Adams to Abigail Adams, February 16, 1780, in *Adams Family Correspondence*, vol. 3, ed. L. H. Butterfield and Marc Friedlaender (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973), 275.

subjects to attempt to supplant them. One historian has recently argued for the existence of a pan-European military culture in the eighteenth century, asserting that “it was the military service, in and of itself, that was important; who or what was being served was much less so.” As alien as this mindset may seem to modern, nationalist sensibilities, in the 1700s military service was “de-coupled” from citizenship, making it acceptable to serve in foreign armies.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, this suggests that European officers served in foreign militaries to advance their professional careers and not necessarily because they had a personal interest in the cause for which they fought.

The following statistics illustrate the extensive use of foreigners in eighteenth-century European armies: in 1705, 40 percent of the Bavarian officer corps was foreign-born; in the 1760s, 25 percent of French, 38 percent of British, and 56 percent of Prussian soldiers were foreigners.<sup>10</sup> At the time of the American Revolution, Europeans accepted the employment of foreigners as an essential military practice. The rebelling Americans, too, sought foreign aid, but they sought a form different from traditional European mercenaries.

As the colonists’ courtship of France demonstrates, the Revolutionaries recognized foreign aid as essential to their successful separation from Britain. The Continental Congress advised its commissioners to the French court of the necessity of a “speedy declaration of France and European assistance” for the United States. After the war, Thomas Jefferson asserted that independence could not have been won without French support. Even before declaring independence, the Revolutionaries knew that the success of their cause required help from abroad. For example, in his resolution for independence, Richard Henry Lee, a congressional delegate from Virginia, asserted the expediency “forthwith to take the most effectual measures for forming foreign alliances.”<sup>11</sup> Note Lee’s choice of words: “measures for

---

9. Urban, *Bayonets for Hire*, 12, 20, 279. William McNeill remarks that European rulers believed that “foreign mercenaries could be expected to exhibit minimal solidarity with the lower classes” under their jurisdiction; William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 136; Scott N. Hendrix, “The Spirit of the Corps: The British Army and the Pre-Nationalism Pan-European Military World and the Origins of American Martial Culture, 1754–1783” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2006), 69–70.

10. Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates and Sovereigns*, 28–29.

11. Committee of Secret Correspondence to the American Commissioners, December 30, 1776, in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 23, ed. William B. Willcox (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 97; Thomas Jefferson, “Answers

forming *foreign alliances*.” Simply receiving the support of foreign soldiers through an apolitical contract, such as Britain’s treaty with Hesse-Kassel, would not be enough. To win, Revolutionaries believed that the United States required not just military aid, but a political and commercial relationship. In other words, the rebelling colonies sought formal foreign recognition of their independence from Great Britain and all the international privileges concomitant with such liberty—concerns for which mercenaries could not provide.

To this end, Congress appointed a committee to devise a plan for securing foreign aid in December 1776. On the basis of the committee’s recommendations, Congress sent commissioners to Vienna, Spain, Prussia, and Tuscany with instructions to seek treaties of commerce and alliance, to prevent the passage of Great Britain’s foreign mercenaries to America, and to induce these courts to declare war on “*the dominions of Great Britain in Europe, the East or West Indies*.” Congress, however, neither instructed nor empowered its commissioners to hire auxiliaries or to recruit soldiers. In a letter to the king of Prussia, Arthur Lee, the American commissioner to Spain and Prussia, noted that the Continental Army required European arms and ammunition, but he made no mention of requiring European manpower.<sup>12</sup> Yet insufficient manpower plagued the Continentals, especially in the war’s early years.

Throughout the war, the Continental Army remained relatively small. The army’s strength seldom exceeded 10,000 men at any one time after 1776. All together, the number of soldiers who served in the army totaled about 730,000, approximately 90 percent of whom were militia volunteers who served only one to three months and saw little action. A colonial gentleman informed Benjamin Franklin that conditions made it difficult to fill the ranks, and the “amazing slowness with which the Levies [came] forward” ever exasperated Washington. One ideological problem confronting

---

to the Query of M. Soulé,” in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb, 20 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States, 1903–4), 17:131; Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789*, 34 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904–37), 4:425.

12. Ford, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 6:1039, 1054–58; Arthur Lee to the King of Prussia, June 29, 1777, in Francis Wharton and John Basset Moore, eds., *The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States*, 6 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1889), 2:357, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field%28DOCID+%@lit%28dc002206%29%29> (accessed March 5, 2012).

the Continental Army was the pervasive Revolutionary belief that popular virtue, more than anything else, would win the war and that the army, because it represented an institution often misused by despotic governments, could be dispensed with. Thomas Paine, the author of the powerful Revolutionary tract “Common Sense,” helped propagate this belief by announcing that the British had “both an army and a country to combat with,” implying that even if the Continental Army were defeated the Revolution would continue. Washington, however, recognized that the ideological righteousness of the Revolution alone would not achieve victory—“to trust altogether in the justice of our Cause . . . would be tempting Providence.”<sup>13</sup> The general believed that only a strong army could win the war. But how could the Revolutionaries build such an army in the face of Americans’ seeming reluctance to enlist?

Despite the anti-mercenary rhetoric hurled at the British for their employment of German auxiliaries, several of the Founding Fathers did conceive of seeking similar aid to support the war effort. In a message to Congress, Washington, noting the devastating effect of sickness on his army, forthrightly asserted that it might be necessary to recruit reinforcements in “some other places than our own states.” As early as 1776, Silas Deane, the American commissioner to France, informed John Jay, then a member of the New York Provincial Congress, that the Continentals could hire German or Swiss troops if they deemed it proper. Charles Carroll of Carrollton, delegate from Maryland, asked Benjamin Franklin about the expediency of hiring five to six thousand German, Swiss, or Irish soldiers. John Adams wrote that he had “Reason to believe upon very good authority, that foreign Troops might be hired, both [*sic*] German, Swiss and French.” Adams further suggested the advantages of pursuing such a course of action, writing that the army was “wasting Americans and we need people for agriculture, manufactory, and commerce.” In other words, Adams considered it advantageous to employ foreign soldiers to keep American citizens at home and contributing to the economy, a justification similar to Britain’s for using

---

13. Lynn Montross, *The Reluctant Rebels: The Story of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789* (New York: Harper, 1950), 295; Samuel Cooper to Benjamin Franklin, June 1, 1778, in *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 26:563; George Washington to Jonathan Trumbull Sr., August 7, 1776, in *The Papers of George Washington: Revolutionary War Series*, ed. Philander D. Chase and Frank E. Grizzard Jr., 22 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985–2013), 5:615; Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 115; George Washington to Jonathan Trumbull Sr., August 7, 1776, in *Papers of George Washington*, 5:616.

foreign mercenaries. No evidence suggesting that Congress considered these proposals has surfaced, however.<sup>14</sup>

If adequate military strength was so difficult to maintain, why did the Continental Congress not solicit the aid of auxiliaries similar to Britain's Hessians? The Congress may have considered auxiliaries too expensive or otherwise logistically impracticable, but I have uncovered no evidence to support this supposition. In fact, few of the Founding Fathers explicitly stated their reasons for eschewing this course of action. Carroll, for instance, related to Franklin that several other members of Congress did not relish his suggestion to hire German, Swiss, or Irish soldiers, and he himself admitted that "it ought to be avoided, if possible," but he did not elaborate his objections. Despite this reluctance to hire foreign mercenaries, however, circumstances rendered it impossible to place the war effort solely in the hands of white colonial patriots. After all, necessity "impelled" Washington to call on the Indians for aid.<sup>15</sup> Later he even went against contemporary prejudices and authorized the enlistment of blacks. If the Revolutionaries could turn to Indians and blacks, why could they not also turn to European mercenaries?

The prevailing scholarly opinion maintains that Revolutionary ideology prevented the Continentals from using mercenaries.<sup>16</sup> Charles Royster argues that the Revolutionaries perceived their cause as morally superior to

---

14. George Washington to President of Congress, February 14, 1777, in *Writings of George Washington*, 4:14; Silas Deane to John Jay, December 3, 1776, in Peter Force, ed., *American Archives: Consisting of Authentick Records, State Papers, Debates and Letters and Other Notices of Publick Affairs*, ser. 5, vol. 3 (Washington, D.C., 1853), 1051; Charles Carroll of Carrollton to Benjamin Franklin, August 12, 1777, in Edmund C. Burnett, ed. *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 8 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1921–36), 2:451; John Adams to Nathanael Greene, May 10, 1777, in *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, ed. Richard K. Showman, 13 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976–2005), 2:77; Atwood, *Hessians*, 32; Burnett, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 3:236n2.

15. Charles Carroll of Carrollton to Benjamin Franklin, August 12, 1777, in Burnett, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 2:451; George Washington to the Massachusetts Legislature, or, in Its Recess, the Committee of Safety, July 11, 1776, in *Writings of George Washington*, 5:261.

16. Royster, *Revolutionary People*, Percy, *Mercenaries*, and Simpson, *Mercenaries in Literature*, address this question to varying degrees. None of them is definitive, however. Royster provides the most compelling argument for ideological constraints, but he does not apply this explicitly to the question of mercenaries. Percy and Simpson both base their conclusions on this issue on secondary—not primary—research.

that of the British. The Americans believed that a “natural,” “native,” and “innate” courage imbued their citizens, and they expected their citizen-soldiers to surpass the strength of any mercenaries. Tyrants used professional armies as tools to crush liberty; thus, the Americans could not use a professional army to protect their freedom. Yet the Continental Army played a key role in achieving independence. To solve this dilemma, Royster states that the “central element in [Americans’] definition of their army was voluntarism.” Americans went to great rhetorical lengths to distinguish their volunteer citizen-soldiers from the mercenaries of Britain because, according to Revolutionary ideology, liberty could survive only if the people proved themselves its worthy defenders, and the Americans offered their “own strength as the sole defense” of their freedom. This fits with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s theory of the social contract, which rested sovereignty with the people; if the sovereignty of the people was threatened, then the people themselves must defend it.<sup>17</sup> Royster implies that mercenaries could claim no place in this ideological framework.

More recent studies agree with Royster, arguing that the Americans understood the Revolution in moral terms—terms that rendered the use of mercenaries “heinous” and “unthinkable.” According to this argument, the Revolutionary enterprise rested on the contributions of citizens, which “totally foreclosed the possibility of using mercenaries.” Another theory asserts that the Revolutionaries sought to defy the conventional wisdom that a volunteer militia could not defend a large area and that the American Revolution in some ways culminated a broader British-American anti-mercenary movement. In this analysis, the Americans wanted to create a new nation while controlling their own military. By so doing, they could claim no past national participation in the European mercenary practice. This argument concludes that the United States was founded on an anti-mercenary ideology and that Americans claimed their national opposition to Britain’s use of mercenaries as part of their identity.<sup>18</sup>

These anti-mercenary feelings originated neither during the American Revolution nor even in the North American colonies. Several studies trace these feelings’ origins to the sixteenth-century philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli.<sup>19</sup> In

---

17. Royster, *Revolutionary People*, 3, 5, 12, 15, 25, 39; Deborah Avant, “From Mercenary to Citizen Army: Explaining Change in the Practice of War,” *International Organization* 54, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 44.

18. Percy, *Mercenaries*, 123, 125; Simpson, *Mercenaries in Literature*, 8–9, 24.

19. J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), provides an in-depth study of the influence of Machiavellian thought on

his writings Machiavelli condemned mercenaries for their lack of loyalty. Describing them as “useless and dangerous,” Machiavelli declared outright that “any man who founds his state on mercenaries can never be safe or secure.” Several early eighteenth-century English philosophers, such as John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, adopted and perpetuated this line of thought during the Enlightenment. The enduring popularity of Trenchard and Gordon’s *Cato’s Letters* (first published in 1720–23) in the colonies demonstrates the resonance of this philosophy among the colonists. This, coupled with the traditional English suspicion of standing armies (labeled “mercenary” by John Trenchard), may have influenced the anti-mercenary ideology of Revolutionary leaders.<sup>20</sup>

Many Revolutionaries reflected these anti-mercenary attitudes in their writings. Several American leaders insisted that Britain’s use of mercenaries signaled the “feeble and destitute conditions” of the British government. The hiring of mercenaries indicated that the Crown could not induce enough Britons to fight for its cause. Furthermore, these “unfeeling Mercenary Soldiers” were “Forces of the Tyrant.” Doubly despicable, the use of auxiliaries signaled not only British despotism but also the despotism of those princes in the “habit of selling the blood of their people for money.” According to American rhetoric, auxiliary soldiers participated in a “dishonorable service” subsidized by an “infamous contract between two arbitrary sovereigns.” These feelings, not confined to Revolutionary leaders, were expressed by rank-and-file Continentals as well. One American soldier, Joshua Slocum, for instance, when writing about the German auxiliaries he fought, stated: “I had conceived an utter detestation and abhorrence for these wretched hirelings, who for filthy lucre would sell their souls.”<sup>21</sup>

---

British and colonial politics; Simpson, *Mercenaries in Literature*, echoes many of Pocock’s conclusions.

20. Simpson, *Mercenaries in Literature*, 38, 41, 93; Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 467; John Trenchard, *A Short History of Standing Armies in England* (London, 1698), iv.

21. “Address of the Convention of Representatives of the State of New York to Their Constituents,” December 23, 1776, in *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay*, ed. Henry Phelps Johnston, 4 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1890–93), 1:116, <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?u=1&num=116&seq=9&view=image&size=100&id=mdp.39015010465998> (accessed March 24, 2012); Ford, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 5:654. This sentiment reflects the opinion of Rousseau, who declared in his “Discourse on Political Economy” that the use of mercenaries indicated that the people of a given country had ceased to share a common cause; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University

But, to Americans, mercenaries were more than just signs of barbaric tyranny—they were also inherently weaker than free citizen-soldiers. Benjamin Franklin consoled his fellow delegate to Congress Silas Deane with the assurance of “how inefficient merely mercenary the regular Troops are, when oppos’d to Freeholders and Freemen, fighting for their Liberties and Properties.” Washington exhorted his army to stand and fight, asserting that a few brave men on their own ground would easily defeat even a large force of “base hirelings and mercenaries.”<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps mercenaries’ most damning flaw to American sensibilities was their inherent threat to freedom. More than mere tyrannical tools, mercenaries threatened liberty in their very essence. Jefferson wrote that the king had carefully obtained Parliament’s permission to obtain auxiliary aid during the Seven Years’ War (1756–63) because he knew that the bringing of “armed men of another country, and of another spirit” into England without legislative consent would endanger English rights. But some Revolutionaries believed that mercenaries threatened liberty even if they were employed at the will of the people. Leading Revolutionaries worried about the reliability of foreign aid. James Duane, a New York delegate to Congress, pondered whether the king’s German auxiliaries would conquer *for* Britain or seize the opportunity to establish their own North American empire. William Strahan, a member of Parliament, warned his American friend Benjamin Franklin against the use of mercenaries, asking, “How many nations have been ruined or enslaved by calling in foreign assistance?” Likewise, General Washington declared it unwise to hire men of uncertain

---

Press, 1997), 28; “To Inhabitants of the United States,” May 29, 1777, in Burnett, *Letters of Delegates to the Continental Congress*, 7:148, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28dg007136%29%29> (accessed March 5, 2012); Samuel Adams to James Warren, December 4, 1776, in Burnett, *Letters of Delegates to the Continental Congress*, 5:568, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28dg005500%29%29> (accessed March 5, 2012); Thomas Jefferson, “Proclamation Concerning Foreigners,” February 5, 1781, in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson in 12 Volumes*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904), 3:161; Ford, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 5:707; Pogue, “Heroes or Hirelings,” 49.

22. Benjamin Franklin to Silas Deane, August 27, 1775, in Burnett, *Letters of Delegates to the Continental Congress*, 1:711, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28dg001659%29%29> (accessed March 5, 2012); George Washington, General Orders, August 23, 1776, in *Writings of George Washington*, 5:479.

loyalty.<sup>23</sup> These attitudes indicate that Americans worried that mercenaries might betray their employers.

The above evidence certainly supports the contention that ideology prevented the American Revolutionaries from employing mercenaries. In many of the colonists' minds, mercenaries represented the very tyranny against which they fought. Mercenaries' weakness when compared to the strengths of free citizen-soldiers made them a dubious asset, at best, and even if they proved an effective fighting force, their supposed untrustworthiness rendered them unfit to aid the American cause.

Yet American actions contradicted this intense anti-mercenary rhetoric. Throughout the war, the Continental Army employed a considerable number of foreign soldiers. Many European officers evinced an enthusiasm for the war and clamored for commissions in the American army. Contrary to the claim that the colonists fought their Revolution in such a way as to take no part in European mercenarism, the presence of these foreigners proves that Americans engaged in this military tradition.

The Revolutionaries, for the most part, did not seek out foreign officers; rather, these officers sought service in the American army on their own initiative. The French, especially, seemed eager to offer their services to the American Revolution, and several officers from France entered the Continental Army before September 1776. Many of them had been on active duty in King Louis's military before the outbreak of the American Revolution, and they took leaves of absence from the French military to offer their services to the American cause. Although the number of offers made in the first few years of the war threatened to overwhelm Congress, their volume declined after France formally allied itself with the United States in 1778, probably because the French who would otherwise have applied to join the Continental Army instead remained to fight for their native land.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the assertion that mercenaries were the tools of tyrants, Congress eagerly welcomed many of these foreign soldiers into the Continental Army, and several of them, such as the Marquis de Lafayette of France,

---

23. Thomas Jefferson, *Autobiography*, in *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 1:208; James Duane to Robert Livingston, January 5, 1776, in Burnett, *Letters of Delegates to the Continental Congress*, 3:34, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28dg00328%29%29> (accessed March 5, 2012); William Strahan to Benjamin Franklin, September 6, 1775, quoted in Pogue, "Heroes or Hirelings," 27, n.p.

24. Ford, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 5:753; 10:177; *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 25:7.

Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben of Prussia, and Count Casimir Pulaski of Poland, became American heroes. Royster writes that some Americans put great faith in European officers, perhaps because of their apparent experience. Referring to von Steuben, who became inspector general of the Continental Army, James Lovell, a member of the Continental Congress, wrote that if General Washington “should be able to make use of his talents . . . it would be of eminent service.” Near the end of the war, Washington himself wrote to a Polish officer, the Count de Benyowski, that the army could have used the count’s services if he had only arrived in America sooner. Furthermore, if there was indeed a pan-European eighteenth-century military world, then the American colonies were definitely a part of it. As one historian has pointed out, Revolutionary leaders modeled the basic structures of the Continental Army along European lines; a number of the Continental leaders, such as Washington, had experience with British or other European militaries and may have been used to the idea of employing foreign officers.<sup>25</sup> Thus, many Revolutionaries gladly accepted the services of European officers, acknowledging no contradiction between Americans’ condemnation of Britain’s use of mercenaries and their own employment of foreigners—even though these officers may well have used the Revolution as an opportunity to increase their own rank and prestige and not necessarily to strike a blow for freedom.

Many Americans, however, did not want too many foreigners in their army. General Washington expressed his concern that commissioning many European officers in the Continental Army would look bad (perhaps because it suggested that the colonists could not produce good military leaders) and crowded out American officers. Considering the large number of foreigners who sought service in the Continental Army, this proved a vexing problem. In 1776 Silas Deane, whose primary mission in France was to obtain supplies for the war effort, commented that the amount of offers from French men of military means threatened to overwhelm him. He was not alone in his feelings: several other American commissioners, including Benjamin Franklin, noted the considerable number of applications for service presented to them. The fact that these commissioners “had no authority to treat or agree with any military person, of any rank whatever to go to

---

25. Royster, *Revolutionary People*, 46; James Lovell to John Langdon, February 8, 1778, in *The Papers of General Wilhelm Friedrich von Steuben, 1777–1794*, ed. Edith von Zemenschky, microfilm ed. (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus International, 1984), roll 1, 43–3; George Washington to Comte de Beniowski, March 18, 1782, in *Writings of George Washington*, 24:78; Hendrix, “Spirit of the Corps,” 299–300.

America,” made these applications, in the words of Franklin, a “perpetual Torment.” To Congress’s chagrin, though, this lack of authority did little to limit the number of foreign offers. Henry Laurens, president of Congress 1777–1778, lamented to a correspondent that Silas Deane could not “Say nay to any Frenchman who called himself a count or chevalier.”<sup>26</sup>

In 1775 and 1776 Congress seems to have rather indiscriminately accepted applications from foreign officers, often commissioning them into the Continental Army with high ranks. By 1777 American enthusiasm for European officers had cooled, largely because many of the early applicants turned out to be charlatans with little ability, more interested in improving their own rank than in furthering the American Revolutionary cause. Alexander Hamilton, General Washington’s aide, wrote that his experience had made him “greatly embarrassed with the Frenchmen among us.” He declared that “their ignorance of our language, of the disposition of our people, the resources and difficiencies of the country, their own habits and tempers—all these are qualifications that put it out of their power to be of any real use . . . to us.” At the same time Congress had become “embarrassed with the number of officers from other countries” seeking employment in the American army, a sentiment shared by Washington and Franklin.<sup>27</sup>

In March 1777, responding to the sheer number of applications and the mediocre quality of those foreign officers already in Continental service, the Congress, far from disdaining all offers of European aid, appointed a Committee on Foreign Applications to process the continued offers of

---

26. George Washington to Gouverneur Morris, July 24, 1778, in *Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution: Selected Letters and Papers*, ed. Stanley J. Idzerda, 5 vols. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977–83), 2:115–16; *The Letters of William Lee, 1766–1783*, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford, 3 vols. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), 1:46, 50; Benjamin Franklin to John Beckwith, May 17, 1779, in *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 29:506; Benjamin Franklin to Jacques Barbeau-Dubourg (?), after October 2, 1777 (?), in *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 25:21; Henry Laurens to John Rutledge, August 12, 1777, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, vol. 11, ed. David R. Chesnut and C. James Taylor (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 448.

27. *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 23:171; Alexander Hamilton to William Duer, May 6, 1777, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett, 27 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961–87), 1:246–47; Benjamin Franklin to John Beckwith, May 17, 1779, in *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 29:507; George Washington to Major General William Heath, July 27, 1777, in *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 1:293; Benjamin Franklin to [the Marquis de Lafayette], in *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 27:445.

Europeans endeavoring to serve in the Continental Army.<sup>28</sup> Although the number of foreign applications declined after the treaty of alliance with France in 1778, the number of applicants remained high enough that the Continental Congress “wisely resolved against employing any more foreigners unless they [were] forced to it by the special contracts of their Embassadors, or very pointed recommendations” and expressly forbade Franklin and the other commissioners in Europe from sending any more applicants to America, ordering them instead to actively discourage further offers.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, European officers continued to apply for service in the Continental Army, and the Committee on Foreign Applications continued to endorse the acceptance of many applicants, though it rejected many, as well.

Contrary to the expectations born of American anti-mercenary rhetoric, many American leaders based their objections to foreign soldiers on practical, not ideological, concerns. The language barrier posed an obvious problem to the use of foreigners in the Continental Army. When writing about certain French applicants, Washington remarked that “their want of our language is an objection to their being joined to any of the Regiments” in the army. He further cautioned that foreign ignorance of the American language and customs “frequently occasion[ed] difficulties and disgust.”<sup>30</sup> Obviously, the inability to communicate with other officers or the rank-and-file soldiers decreased a commander’s effectiveness.

This objection was easily surmounted, however, and Washington admitted that some European applicants would make fine officers as soon as they learned English. For instance, Washington asserted that Brigadier General Matthias Roche de Fermoy, a French officer in the Continental Army, would render good service “were he better acquainted with our language,”

---

28. The committee consisted of James Lovell, Thomas Heyward, and Daniel Roberdeau; Ford, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 7:185. The committee’s name is worth noting: Committee for Foreign Applications, *not* Committee for Foreign Recruitment. This indicates both that Congress’s policy was not to actively seek out foreign soldiers for American service and that it was cognizant of the apparent enthusiasm of foreign officers for the Revolution.

29. John Laurens to Henry Laurens, March 25, 1778, in *Papers of von Steuben*, roll 1, 78–9; Benjamin Franklin to John Beckwith, May 17, 1779, in *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 29:507.

30. George Washington to the President of Congress, October 7, 1776, in *Writings of George Washington*, 6:175; George Washington to Count Pulaski, January 14, 1778, in *Writings of George Washington*, 10:305.

and he advised Fermoy to give up his command “until he [had] made himself sufficient Master of our language to convey his Orders.”<sup>31</sup> Washington also proposed an alternative solution to the language problem by suggesting that foreign officers raise and command corps of their own people.<sup>32</sup> Of course, foreigners who spoke English circumvented this objection altogether. For example, Washington praised Colonel Thomas Conway, an Irishman who had served in the French Army, as “infinitely better to serve us, than many [foreigners] who have been promoted, as he speaks our language.”<sup>33</sup> Washington’s response to the language issue shows that the commanding general, at least, considered foreigners useful assets and did not altogether oppose their employment.

The issue of rank also vexed Congress and the army’s commanders. Many of the foreigners who petitioned Congress for commissions in the Continental Army emphasized the ranks they had held in other armies and requested to receive higher ranks in America as partial payment for their services. For instance, Baron de Holtzendorff, a French nobleman, recommended to Congress a German acquaintance, Baron Knoblauch; in his introductory letter, Holtzendorff commented on Knoblauch’s service in Russia and Denmark and advised Congress that “the Rank of brigadier General [was] indeed the least [they could] grant him.”<sup>34</sup>

These requests for high rank appeared absurd to many Revolutionaries,

---

31. Contrary to Washington’s prediction, Fermoy proved himself less than competent; after failing to receive a requested promotion, Fermoy resigned his commission in 1778 and returned to his home in the West Indies. George Washington to the Board of War, December 4, 1776, in *Writings of George Washington*, 6:326; George Washington to Major General Philip Schuyler, July 27, 1777, in *Papers of George Washington*, 10:443; Mary Theresa Leiter, *Biographical Sketches of the Generals of the Continental Army of the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: J. Wilson and Son, 1889), 98, [http://books.google.com/books?id=vjc9AAAAYAAJ&printsec=front-cover&source=\\_gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&cf=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=vjc9AAAAYAAJ&printsec=front-cover&source=_gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&cf=false) (accessed March 19, 2012).

32. George Washington to Baron de Calbiac, July 23, 1776, in *Writings of George Washington*, 5:329. The Frenchman Charles-Armand Tuffin, Marquis de La Rouerie, commanded one such legion (known as Armand’s Legion) of foreign rank-and-file soldiers, raised with Washington’s approval; George Washington to Marquis de Lafayette, July 3, 1778, in *Writings of George Washington*, 8:90.

33. George Washington to the President of Congress, May 9, 1777, in *Writings of George Washington*, 8:31.

34. Baron Holtzendorff to Henry Laurens, June 1, 1778, in *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 13:387.

especially after some of these foreigners proved themselves incompetent. Furthermore, these “military fortune hunters,” whom Washington considered “little better than adventurers,” drove rank inflation, making it difficult to accommodate soldiers who had displayed real merit: when officers with actual abilities offered their services, they naturally expected to receive even higher ranks than their less accomplished comrades. As an additional embarrassment to Congress and the army, many of the early applicants who received high rank had apparently not previously held any rank at all. Moreover, some European officers who came to America in 1777 and 1778 expected to receive commissions superior to those of earlier applicants in America who had been of subordinate rank in the Old World. Thomas Conway, for instance, requested a higher rank than those of his compatriots Fermoy and Philippe Hubert Preudhomme de Borre, claiming that he could not bear to serve beneath men to whom he had once been superior. This problem quickly became so pernicious that the Committee for Foreign Applications declared itself “averse to offering any resolution for places above the rank of subaltern.” This policy proved only a partial solution, though, for Washington decried that even foreigners who at first seemed willing to accept subordinate ranks “very soon extend[ed] their views, and [became] importunate for offices they [had] no right to look for.”<sup>35</sup>

The Continental Congress could not possibly accede to the requests of all the European officers who wished to be made generals in America, since an army can sustain only a finite number of officers. Washington, cognizant of this problem, lamented to Major General Artemis Ward that he was “under the most disagreeable dilemma” because he did not know what to do with those foreign officers already accepted into Continental service. Hoping to reduce the number of foreign applicants, the commanding general urged Benjamin Franklin to advise European officers of the futility of applying to Congress because, “our corps being already formed and fully officered,” the army simply had no room for them.<sup>36</sup>

---

35. Washington to Morris, July 24, 1778, in *Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution*, 116; George Washington to Silas Deane, August 13, 1777, in *Writings of George Washington*, 9:61; George Washington to Benjamin Franklin, August 17, 1777, in *Writings of George Washington*, 9:87; Freeman, *George Washington*, 4:421; James Lovell to George Washington, May 26, 1777, in *Papers of George Washington*, 9:534; George Washington to Major General William Heath, July 27, 1777, in *Papers of George Washington*, 10:438.

36. George Washington to Major General Artemis Ward, February 20, 1777, in *Writings of George Washington*, 7:174; George Washington to Benjamin Franklin, August 17, 1777, in *Papers of George Washington*, 10:648.

Intimately connected to the question of rank, the jealousies of American officers also excited tensions over the use of foreigners. Just as some Europeans refused to serve under men they had previously commanded, many American officers resented the high rank accorded to newly arrived outsiders. Foreigners' pretensions to high rank irritated many American officers, and, as Washington noted, American officers did "not like to be put under them." Congress also recognized this problem. Henry Laurens acknowledged that granting to foreigners ranks greater than those of some Americans was an embarrassment to that assembly. The rank and file, too, expressed concerns about the use of foreign officers, and Washington noted the unwillingness of private soldiers to follow foreigners unless they spoke English and had a good reputation.<sup>37</sup>

Certainly, American officers also squabbled among themselves over issues of rank, but foreignness added an extra dimension not present in these domestic disputes. John Laurens, one of Washington's aides-de-camp, remarked to his father, Henry Laurens, that there existed "a prejudice against foreigners in many of our officers." Though a number of Revolutionaries expressed disgust with the conduct, pretensions, and apparent self-interest and charlatantry of some of the foreigners in the Continental Army, others did not trust them at all. In November 1778 the Committee of Arrangement reported to Congress that the number of foreign officers and their high rank had "given great and general uneasiness throughout the army." James Lovell confided to Benjamin Franklin of his unwillingness to have "Foreigners placed in the highest trust," for so doing made the Continental Army resemble the "monarchical production" of European militaries.<sup>38</sup>

General Nathanael Greene's attitude exemplified this uneasiness. Greene, who generally opposed the employment of foreigners in the Continental

---

37. George Washington to Major General Horatio Gates, February 20, 1777, in *Writings of George Washington*, 7:177; James Lovell to Benjamin Franklin, July 4–9, 1777, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 24:267; Henry Laurens to the Marquis de Lafayette, July 18, 1778, in *Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution*, 2:108; George Washington to Baron de Calbiac, July 23, 1776, in *Writings of George Washington*, 4:32.

38. John Laurens to Henry Laurens, July 6, 1778, in *Papers of von Steuben*, roll 1, 186; Marquis de Lafayette, *Memoir of 1779*, in *Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution*, 1:11; Ford, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 12:1159; James Lovell to Benjamin Franklin, July 5, 1777, in *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 7:293, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field%28DOCID+%20lit%28dg007257%29%29> (accessed March 5, 2012).

Army, warned John Adams against accepting too many foreign offers of military service. Calling them “so many Spies in our Camp,” Greene asserted that outsiders gave America no “internal strength” because “the only tie we have upon foreigners is the Sentiment of honor too slender for the happiness of a Country to depend on.” According to Greene, Americans simply could not rely on foreigners. He pondered, “What method can Great Britain take to defeat us more effectively than to introduce a great number of Foraigners into the Army” and then buy them off, noting that “British Gold may reason forcible with those whose hopes and future expectations are not connected with the people they betray.” Washington expressed similar sentiments. The general informed Congress that British efforts to induce soldiers to desert the Continental Army had a “particular Manner on those who are not native” to the colonies. In Washington’s opinion, no attachment “further than interest” bound foreigners to the Revolutionary cause.<sup>39</sup>

One insurmountable problem with French officers, several Revolutionaries believed, was that they had a greater duty to France than to America in the event of a war in Europe. The Marquis de Lafayette acknowledged that his service in America was service to France under a different flag and that he would rather be a grenadier in the French army than hold the highest rank in any foreign military. If Lafayette, possibly the most esteemed foreigner in the Continental Army, asserted a greater loyalty to an entity other than the United States, how could Americans expect to rely on any outsiders? Of course, factors other than loyalty induced foreign officers to forsake the American cause. Benjamin Franklin complained that multiple French officers, disappointed by their failure to receive promotions or scornful of American prejudicial attitudes toward them, had “quitted our Service in Disgust.” The resignation of these French officers further cemented American mistrust of foreign soldiers. Ultimately, declared Washington, “it is by the zeal and activity of our own people that the cause must be supported and not by a few hungry adventurers.”<sup>40</sup>

---

39. Nathanael Greene to John Adams, July 7 and July 28, 1777, in *Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 2:70–71, 98–99; George Washington to the President of Congress, May 13, 1777, in *Writings of George Washington*, 8:8; George Washington to Richard Henry Lee, May 17, 1777, in *Writings of George Washington*, 8:75.

40. George Washington to the President of Congress, January 3, 1780, in *Writings of George Washington*, 17:340; Lafayette to the Comte de Maurepas, October 24, 1777, in *Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution*, 1:133; Benjamin Franklin to John Jay, October 4 [28], 1779, in *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 30:470; George Washington to Richard Henry Lee, May 17, 1777, in *Writings of George Washington*, 8:75.

For the most part, those foreigners who fought in the Continental Army came to America and offered their services on their own initiative. In the case of military engineers, however, the Americans actively pursued some capable European officers. The Revolutionaries recognized early on that, as theirs was largely a defensive war, the Continental Army required soldiers with “a Knowledge comprehending the Duties of the Field and Fortifications” who would be able to plan new fortifications and repair older defensive works. Unfortunately for the colonists, America had produced few engineers of the same caliber as their European counterparts. In December 1775 Congress directed its Committee of Secret Correspondence to procure European engineers for the Continental Army. By February 1777 the American commissioners in Europe had successfully recruited the talents of three French engineers: the Chevalier Louis Duportail, Louis de Shaix La Radière, and Lieutenant Colonel Jean-Baptiste Gouvion. Although Congress might spend a long time debating the merits of other foreign officers, the necessity of good engineers could trump all objections to the use of foreigners in the Continental Army. For example, Washington recommended one officer, the Chevalier Count of Vrecount, a Luxembourger, as a “skillful Engineer [who] will be extremely useful and should be employed *though he may not understand our language.*” Despite the urgent need for engineers, however, by February 1777 Duportail, La Radière, and Gouvion were the only foreigners recruited at the express direction of Congress.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the war, the Revolutionaries recruited very few European soldiers through such direct means.

The experience of Philippe du Coudray typifies the various American concerns about foreigners in their army. In 1777 du Coudray, a French military engineer, presented himself to Congress bearing a contract from Silas Deane promising him the rank of major general in command of the Continental Army’s artillery. As noted above, Deane had no congressional authority to engage such contracts, but du Coudray insisted that Congress

---

41. Paul K. Walker, *Engineers of Independence: A Documentary History of the Army Engineers in the American Revolution, 1775–1783* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Division, Office of Administrative Services, Office of the Chief of Engineers, 1981), 1, 5; George Washington to Richard Henry Lee, May 17, 1777, in *Writings of George Washington*, 8:76, emphasis added. George Washington to John Hancock, April, 10, 1777, in *Papers of George Washington*, 9:123. It should be noted that the recruitment of specially skilled foreigners (such as engineers) was a historically common practice in European warfare; James Lovell to George Washington, July 24, 1777, in *Writings of George Washington*, 8:386.

ratify his agreement with the American commissioner. To refuse the contract might insult du Coudray and create ill feelings in France toward the American Revolutionaries. On the other hand, since the contract granted du Coudray a rank superior to that of several influential American generals, including Henry Knox, commander of artillery, accepting the Frenchman for service in the Continental Army would probably offend the American officer corps. General John Sullivan, for example, informed Washington that he would “be under the disagreeable necessity of quitting the service” if du Coudray received a rank superior to his. Washington considered it unadvisable to entrust so important a position to a foreigner without ties to America. Washington’s concerns were justified when Congress honored du Coudray’s contract, which resulted in a “plentiful crop of resignations”—including those of Generals Knox, Greene, and Sullivan. Congress staved off these resignations and averted disaster by making du Coudray an “Inspector General of Ordnance and Military Manufactories” instead of granting him a command position.<sup>42</sup> John Adams summarized the problem of the du Coudray contract as finding a way to develop a consistent response to foreign applications that adequately assessed these offers and did “justice to our own officers,” a balance that Congress and the army failed to achieve.<sup>43</sup> The du Coudray case illustrates the tensions that high-ranking foreigners created within the Continental Army, yet it also demonstrates Congress’s willingness to employ foreigners, despite powerful objections.

Indeed, the sources make it quite clear that the Revolutionaries never formulated a standard response to foreign offers of service. The case of Count Benyowski illustrates the Revolutionaries’ ambivalence to foreigners in their war. Born of Slavic descent in Hungary, Benyowski was a typical eighteenth-century European soldier of fortune. He served in the Polish army, conspired with Russian rebels, and assisted the French in their East African colonial endeavors (becoming the “Emperor of Madagascar” in the process) before offering his services to the Continental Congress. In 1782

---

42. The Committee of Foreign Affairs to the American Commissioners, December 1, 1777, in *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 25:220–21; John Sullivan to George Washington, July 1, 1777, quoted in Freeman, *George Washington*, 4:455; George Washington to Richard Henry Lee, June 1, 1777, in *Writings of George Washington*, 6:159; Showman, *Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 2:109–10n2; this affair ended when du Coudray’s horse jumped off a pontoon bridge, drowning the Frenchman in the Schuylkill River in Pennsylvania on September 16, 1777; Walker, *Engineers*, 17.

43. John Adams to Nathanael Greene, July 7, 1777, in *Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 2:111.

Congress considered the count's proposal to introduce a legionary corps of Germans into the Continental Army. The Committee for Foreign Applications noted that Benyowski's scheme had the "approbation of the Commander in Chief." While Washington believed that the plan "may be attended with considerable advantages," he recognized that the Congress's acceptance of the count's proposal depended on the political affairs in Europe, forecasts for how long the Revolutionary War might continue, and the manner in which the plan could be executed. Secretary of War Benjamin Lincoln testified that Congress could easily pay for the corps. The Committee for Foreign Applications endorsed the proposal as "conducive to the benefits of the United States," concluding that it would be cheaper to deploy this corps of foreigners than to recruit colonists. Furthermore, the committee reported that "the easy terms on which the legion [could] be obtained and the services they would probably render [were] strong incitements to our accepting the proposition of the Count." Despite these recommendations, however, Congress rejected the count's plan.<sup>44</sup>

The official record is silent on the reasons for this refusal, but it is very likely that Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown in October of the previous year influenced the decision. By the time Benyowski presented his scheme to Congress, events had turned greatly in America's favor, and representatives from Britain and the colonies were already negotiating a peace treaty. The Congress may have felt the war was all but over, which would render further reinforcements unnecessary, especially since it did not intend to keep a large peacetime army.<sup>45</sup> There is no indication that members of Congress considered that the employment of Benyowski's Germans would have violated their Revolutionary principles. On the contrary, several leading

---

44. Benyowski, in the service of France, established a colony on Madagascar between 1773 and 1777; the island's natives elected him their emperor. Eufrosina Dvoichenko-Markov, "Benjamin Franklin and Count M. A. Benyowski," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 99, no. 6 (1955): 405–6, 410; Congress, Report of Committee re. Comte de Benyowsky, May 24, 1782, in *The Papers of the Continental Congress*, microfilm ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Archives, 1958–59), M247, r26, i19, vol. 1, 293; George Washington to Baron von Steuben, April 12, 1782, in *Writings of George Washington*, 24:112; War, Secretary at. Report r. Comte de Benyowsky, May 9, 1782, in *Papers of the Continental Congress*, M247, r162, i149, vol. 1, 345; Ford, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 22:261, 297–98.

45. Jean-Guillaume Backhaus to Benjamin Franklin, February 7, 1783, in *Calendar of the Papers of Benjamin Franklin in the Library of the American Philosophical Society*, ed. I. Minis Hayes, 6 vols. (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1908), 3:17.

Revolutionaries seemed quite enthusiastic about taking advantage of the Hungarian count's offer.

Clearly, the American Revolutionaries considered Britain's use of foreigners in the war in a different light from their own. Yet, though they condemned the Crown for employing base hirelings and bloodthirsty foreign mercenaries, the Revolutionaries themselves accepted the services of a considerable number of foreign soldiers, many of whom acted in accordance with traditional European mercenary practices. Of course, the need for manpower may have forced Revolutionary leaders to contradict their anti-mercenary principles in order to wage their war effectively, but it seems that American leaders went to great lengths to cast the foreign soldiers in the Continental Army in an acceptable mold. According to the historian Jay Fliegelman, it was "psychologically . . . vital for the colonists to believe that they were fighting . . . for the cause . . . of a glorious volunteerism." Just as Americans portrayed their army as a band of free citizen-soldiers, as opposed to the professional mercenaries of the king's army, they also depicted the foreigners fighting for America as "*Volunteers* in [the American] army," in contrast to the German hirelings of Britain. Although these men still insisted on receiving rank and pay, by calling them "*volunteers* from foreign states," leading Americans distanced these foreign soldiers from the negative connotations associated with mercenarism, thus legitimizing their place in the Revolutionary effort. For example, according to America's General Horatio Gates, Gilles Jean Marie de Barazer de Kermorvan, a European soldier of fortune who had officered in both the French and Turkish armies, was a volunteer whose "Views are truly patriotic" and who "neither Seeks reward . . . but as he shall Merit." Scholars acknowledge that the European practice of mercenarism generally became viewed as dishonorable in the aftermath of the French Revolution, but the fact that American Revolutionaries actively distinguished between Great Britain's foreign mercenaries and their own foreign "volunteers" indicates that the moral degradation of mercenary practices was already under way by the 1770s.<sup>46</sup>

---

46. Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 126, quoted in Simpson, *Mercenaries in Literature*, 11; George Washington to Major General William Heath, July 13, 1777, in *Papers of George Washington*, 10:273, emphasis added; George Washington to Lt. Col. Jacob Gerhard Diriks, February 21, 1781, in *Writings of George Washington*, 21:267, emphasis added; Gen-

Some foreigners recognized the fine distinction between mercenary and volunteer in their petitions to Congress. Von Steuben, for instance, insisted that if his receiving a high rank would cause American officers discontent, he would rather serve as a volunteer without official rank. Congress, perhaps convinced of von Steuben's sincerity, perhaps rationalizing its acceptance of the German's offer, praised him for having "in a most disinterested and heroic manner offered his services to these states in the quality of a volunteer." Not all Revolutionary leaders perceived von Steuben in so generous a light, however; Rufus King, a congressional delegate from Massachusetts, after the war described the German as "a soldier of Fortune, and a mercenary."<sup>47</sup>

But von Steuben invoked more than just the spirit of volunteerism—he also claimed to desire to deserve the "title of a Citizen of America." To many Americans, this desire for citizenship further separated the foreigners who served in the Continental Army from those employed by the British. Whereas Britain's mercenaries could expect that "their only reward, if they escaped Death and Capture, would be a return to the Despotism of their Prince, to be by him again sold to do the drudgery of some other Enemy to the rights of Mankind," foreigners in the Continental Army could become part of the American polity. Some leading Revolutionaries considered this a highly favorable quality. Reflecting on Benyowski's proposed German corps, Washington wrote, "Taking the Oath of Fidelity and Allegiance [would] be the natural consequence of Commissions and employments."<sup>48</sup>

Ascertaining the number of foreign soldiers who actually became citizens of the United States lies beyond the scope of this study, but the fact that Revolutionaries discussed this possibility indicates that some Americans desired this outcome. For one thing, new citizens would contribute to the

---

eral Horatio Gates to Benjamin Franklin, June 23, 1776, quoted in *Papers of George Washington*, 5:67–68n1; Lynch and Walsh, "The Good Mercenary?" 133.

47. Baron von Steuben to George Washington, December 6, 1777, in *Papers of George Washington*, 12:567; Journals of the Continental Congress, entry for July 14, 1778, in *Papers of von Steuben*, r. 1, 35–4; Rufus King to Elbridge Gerry, November 5, 1786, in Burnett, *Letters of Delegates to the Continental Congress*, 23:637, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28dg023558%29%29> (accessed March 5, 2012).

48. Baron von Steuben to George Washington, December 6, 1777, in *Papers of George Washington*, 12:367; Thomas Jefferson, "Proclamation Concerning Foreigners," February 5, 1781, in *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, 3:162; George Washington to Baron von Steuben, April 12, 1782, in *Writings of George Washington*, 24:115.

economy, becoming “a great alleviation to the future burthens” of the states.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, by extending the possibility of citizenship, the Revolutionaries sought to strip foreign soldiers of one of the most objectionable mercenary qualities—loyalty to any power but the United States.

Although mainly a conflict between Great Britain and the empire’s Atlantic colonies, the American Revolution involved foreigners almost from the beginning. Outside participation in this war went beyond the formation of diplomatic and military alliances—it also included the employment of foreign soldiers by both sides. The British government hired German auxiliary units in accordance with traditional European military practices. The American Revolutionaries employed a considerable number of individual European officers—also in accordance with European military practices. Many Americans considered Great Britain’s use of foreign troops a heinous crime, further justifying their revolt, and many Revolutionary leaders went to great rhetorical lengths to condemn this course of action. By labeling Britain’s German auxiliaries as mercenaries, Revolutionaries insinuated that those soldiers were self-interested, unreliable, and inferior tools of despots, and they used these hirelings to differentiate between Britain’s tyranny and America’s liberty.

The Americans, however, also employed foreign soldiers in their armies—many of whom acted more in accordance with European practices than with Revolutionary ideals. Some Americans considered the use of foreign soldiers a bad policy, and most Revolutionary leaders recognized the difficulties foreigners created for the army. Officers without a command of the English language could not well command American troops. The alleged pretensions of some European officers repelled many American officers, disgusted with these foreigners’ often unrealistic expectations of rank. The question of rank not only created tensions between foreign and native officers, but also precipitated several crises within the Continental Army’s officer corps. As well, many American leaders felt that they could not trust foreigners as much as they could their own citizens. However, few Revolutionaries declared that the use of foreigners violated the Revolution’s principles, and Congress accepted offers from foreign soldiers throughout the war.

The Continental Army’s use of foreigners, of course, contradicted Americans’ hostile attitude toward Britain’s employment of outsiders. After all, many of the foreign soldiers fighting for America—especially

---

49. Ford, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 22:297.

among the European officers—acted in the eighteenth-century mercenary manner. Far from having no part in the European mercenary tradition, American Revolutionary leaders simply cloaked their mercenaries in the guise of the “disinterested and heroic” volunteer. By portraying them as volunteers, many Americans chose to depict foreigners in the Continental Army as men who were dedicated to Revolutionary ideals rather than motivated by self-interest. Moreover, by emphasizing that foreigners could become citizens of the new republic, Revolutionary leaders sought to incorporate foreign soldiers into their body politic, transforming these outsiders into Americans.