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“Soldiers for Sale: German “Mercenaries” with the British in Canada during the American Revolution, 1776-83 (Book Review)” by Jean-Pierre Wilhelmy

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Jean-Pierre Wilhelmy, *Soldiers for Sale: German “Mercenaries” with the British in Canada during the American Revolution, 1776-83*. Montreal: Baraka Books, 2012. Pp. 296.

The author begins by explaining the genealogical origins of this book: “Growing up with the name Jean-Pierre Wilhelmy in Quebec sparked curiosity” (p. 17). The search led him to a document signed “sergeant-major in the Hesse-Hanau troops” and, at Library and Archives Canada, a collection of correspondence between British governors in Canada and German officers. From there the trail brought Wilhelmy to archives in Britain, the United States, and Germany to uncover the surprising origins of a substantial group of French-Canadians. Surprising because, contrary to conventional wisdom that Quebecers’ roots are largely traceable to French settlement, Wilhelmy demonstrates that during the American Revolution, approximately two to three thousand German mercenaries hired to fight for the British found new homes on Quebec soil, started families, and assimilated rapidly into French-Canadian society.

As Gabriel Nadeau wrote in 1945: “It is said, and perhaps rightly so, that we [French-Canadians] are the only people on earth who truly know our roots”¹ (p. 154). But Wilhelmy’s book dispels this popular myth. The similarity between German and Quebec lifestyles, unions through the Catholic Church with Quebec women, and the alteration of German names to sound more French and English made for quick and efficient assimilation that left little to no trace.

Wilhelmy’s use of letters and diaries from German officers and Governors in Canada gives insight into the experiences of the German mercenaries. By integrating these sources with official Canadian and German documents of the time, Wilhelmy contributes to our understanding of the behaviours of the mercenaries. In this respect, the book’s central argument—that German mercenaries have played a significant and important role in Quebec history—challenges the earlier historical writings of Ovide-M.H. Lapalice, Joseph-Edmond

¹ Gabriel Nadeau, “L’apport germanique dans la formation du Canada français,” *Mémoires de la Société généalogique canadienne-française* 1, 4 (1945): 274-277.

Roy and Madeline Ferron, which negatively portray the German mercenaries in Canada.²

Soldiers For Sale, like the life experience of the Quebecers-to-be who are the subject of the book, begins across the Atlantic shortly after the outbreak of armed resistance to British authority in the American colonies, when England made treaties with six German principalities for the service of military units in the British army. The most significant treaties were signed with the Duke of Brunswick and Frederick II of Hessel-Cassel. Together these principalities contributed between twenty and thirty thousand soldiers, approximately five thousand of which stayed in North America. According to the author, those who stayed behind represented three to four percent of the male population in Canada.

The bulk of the book details the role of the German mercenaries during the American Revolutionary War. In chapter three (1776 to 1778), Wilhelmy demonstrates the Germans' eagerness to fight and confidence in their military capabilities, which verged on arrogance, by drawing on letters from officers and General Riedesel who reported regularly to the German princes. When British Governor Carleton chose to order his men back to their quarters to halt the fighting, it was met with dismay by German officers who, viewing the American rebels as poor soldiers who could be readily defeated, wished to continue fighting: "We hold the key to Canada because we are now masters of Lake Champlain," stated one officer in protest (p. 78). The fourth chapter begins in 1778 with the entry of France into the war on the side of the American colonies, and rising fears of an invasion into Canada. When Haldimand replaced Carleton as governor, 617 additional German troops were acquired from Anhalt-Zerbst. To help ensure the defence of Canada, they were assigned to rebuild fortifications at Sorel, St. Jean and Ile-aux-Noix, which covered the approaches to Montreal.

² See for example Lapalice, Ovide-M.H., *Histoire de la seigneurie Massue et de la paroisse de Saint-Aimé*, 1930, pp. 120-130; Joseph Edmond Roy, *Histoire de la Seigneurie de Lauzon*, L'Évis, 1900, Vol. 111, 65-75 et Vol. III, 159-164; Madeleine Ferron, *Les Beaucerons, ces insoumis. Petite histoire de la Beauce*, 1735-1867, Montréal, 1974. While Wilhelmy's analysis for why these historians held such a negative view is brief, he suggests it was due to the lack of sources. Indeed, his expansive research on the subject lends credence to this position. See Wilhelmy, 80-82.

These two chapters also explore the first interactions between the Canadians and the Germans. Barracks space was limited, so it was necessary to billet troops in private homes, an obligation that the British administration levied against households of those known to be sympathetic to the American cause or unsympathetic to England. These domestic arrangements offer historians insight into a complex dynamic between the English Crown, French Canadians, English Canadians, and German mercenaries who were on the one hand fighting a war their hosts opposed but also defending their homes from invasion. That some of the billeted German troops would eventually make these Canadian communities their permanent homes makes any evidence about the relationships between the mercenaries and their (one presumes unwilling) hosts all the more significant to the history of German immigration in Quebec.

Wilhelmy engages with the historiography, disagreeing with some historians whose assessments of German mercenaries are negative. For example, in *Histoire de la seigneurie de Lauzon* (1897-1904), J. Edmond Roy stated “These soldiers possessed all the uncouthness of the Teutons and the insolence of badly taught German riders. More than one colonist thus had cause to complain about their extortions” (p. 80). Wilhelmy argues that correspondence between German officers and Governors Haldimand and Carleton provide more context to the Germans’ behaviour. Whereas one historian termed the German troops “thieves” for stealing crops and animals, Wilhelmy reveals them to have been acting out of desperation resulting from a lack of rations that threatened starvation.

Wilhelmy goes on to show that civilian reports of abuse by the troops were taken very seriously, investigated, with severe punishment often meted out. Thus, while one may question the reliability of German officers’ explanations for their soldiers’ behaviour, the punishments awarded underscore that the officers and the British administration alike had a fundamental interest in maintaining discipline among the troops and good relations between the garrison and the civilian population.

While these chapters provide a fuller picture of the German mercenary experience in Canada, the author misses opportunities for deeper analysis. He cites a series of letters written by a German soldier to his family back in Europe, that, the author remarks, “offer a fascinating glimpse of eighteenth-century Quebec, quite different from the picture presented by the English and French and passed

on by historians” (p. 83). However, Wilhelmy does not divulge what this newly revealed image is or how it differs from traditional or historical accounts. Another missed opportunity is the treatment of Baroness von Riedesel’s journal, which Wilhelmy states is the most important source on the German mercenaries. While the author quotes it frequently, he often does so without discussion. In the absence of further analysis and context, the reader is left with an incomplete understanding of the everyday life and impact of German mercenaries in their temporary homes. Looking at some of the earliest historiography on the subject which Wilhelmy condemns but only briefly seeks to rebuke, his work could have done more to assess pre-1914 studies on the subject. Were the opinions of historians such as Roy motivated by cultural biases rooted in the German’s participation in the Revolutionary War against the American colonists on behalf of the British crown? If the views of the historians reflected animus against the Germans at the time of the American Revolution, might that help explain why the soldiers who stayed in Quebec attempted to assimilate by such measures as altering their last names?

Wilhelmy’s strongest and most interesting chapter is the final one, where the fate of the German mercenaries after the war is explored. Of the thousands who remained, some stayed because they were refused allowances to return to Germany. These soldiers were denied for a variety of reasons including criminal convictions, bad conduct, poor physical condition, that fact some of them fought on behalf of German principality other than their own, or for practical reasons as in the case of the Duke of Brunswick who was interested in reducing the strength of his forces. Some were encouraged to stay behind because of disgrace, or had already been discharged or deserted. Finally, some chose to stay behind and adopt Canada as their home. Some soldiers had, already married local women and started a family. Although Wilhelmy has made a diligent effort to trace individuals, he also shows, using the methodology of genealogists, how easily a surname could be assimilated and therefore lost to history. For example, names such as Koch, Maher, Jacob, and Wilhelm became Caux, Maheu, Jacques and Guillaume respectively. Some German surnames were simply translated to English or French as in the case of Zimmerman to Carpenter, or Stein to Stone. Finally, phonetic confusions like “Sch” were simplified to “G” or “J.” In demonstrating the significance of the research for French-Canadian genealogical history, which prompted the author’s interest in the subject in the

first place, this final chapter effectively rounds out the study and establishes the book's place in the historiography. The book includes informative appendixes, including a twenty-six page list of German mercenaries who stayed in Canada and their main quarters during the war. This material will be useful to anyone interested in exploring his or her possible German roots in Quebec.

Readers interested in genealogy will particularly profit from Wilhelmy's study. Those seeking to explore Quebec's experience during the American Revolution will also find much of value, but might wish for fuller analysis.

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