

German soldiers in eighteenth century India

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Introduction

Martin Christof-Füchsle's essay (in the MIDA Archival Reflexicon) on German archival sources for the study of the Anglo-Mysore wars concentrates on the holdings of two major archives that are indeed the most pertinent for this survey: the holdings of the Niedersächsisches Landesarchiv in Hanover, containing files relating to the two Hanoverian regiments in EIC service between 1782 and 1792, and the archive of the Danish-Halle mission in Tranquebar, located in the Archiv der Franckeschen Stiftungen zu Halle. He further points out the existence of pertinent material in other German archives, such as the Thüringisches Staatsarchiv in Gotha and the Brandenburgisches Hauptstaatsarchiv in Potsdam. Beginning his survey of these archival holdings with holdings containing documents relating to military and administrative issues, he then goes on to discuss in greater detail files containing ego-documents that can supply a more personal, potentially a peculiar German perspective of the military events. In the present essay, I want to supply a follow-up to Christof-Füchsle's essay, highlighting what I consider to be a very promising potential for finding additional sources in German archives, including personal letters and diaries. Subsequently, I discuss the value of these documents, arguing for taking their intended or presumed readership into account.

The present situation

Christof-Füchsle starts his survey of German sources on the second Anglo-Mysore war (1780-1784) with a reference to the published narrations and travel journals that Hanoverian officers began publishing soon after embarking on EIC ships to India, continuing to do so many years after returning to Germany (the latest was Best 1807). In one of the cases, that of Chaplain Friedrich Ludwig Langstedt (1750-1804), the experience in India even became the basis and starting point of his career as an author and translator of books related to world trade and travel in various continents (Langstedt 1789, 1799, 1801, 1803).

Until now, the contemporary published texts by these Hanoverian officers are more numerous in quantity than the personal letters and diaries that have been located in the archives. For against five books (Langstedt 1789, Langstedt 1799, Scharnhorst 1788, Scharnhorst 1789 and Best 1807) and about thirty magazine articles in varying lengths (see the list in Tzoref Ashkenazi 2009:208-11) we have at our disposal only five substantial personal testimonies in manuscript form, including:

- 1) the letters of Ferdinand Breymann (1764-1794) (being rather short, they can be considered a single document for the present purpose; NLA HA Bestand Kleine Erwerbungen A 48 Nr. 2);
- 2) the diary of Carl de Roques (1757-1786) (NLA HA Bestand Kleine Erwerbungen A 48 Nr.1);
- 3) a letter by Peter Joseph du Plat (1761-1824) (NLA HA 38c Nr. 23, pp. 20-28), with a copy among the papers of August Georg Ulrich von Hardenberg (1762-1806), (Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv Bestand 37 Herrschaft Neuhardenberg, Kr. Lebus –Akten (1211-1945) Film 1739: Teilnahme August Georg Ulrichs von Hardenberg an den englischen Feldzügen in Indien);
- 4) the diary of Christian August von Wangenheim (located in Thüringisches Staatsarchiv Gotha, Bestand 2-97-0958: Familie von Wangenheim, Archivalien-Signatur 529: Tagebuch des Christoph August von Wangenheim (1741-1830) über seine Reise nach Ostindien (Mysore-Krieg));
- 5) the military-geographical survey of the Deccan by Carl August Schlegel (1762-1789), which, having been initially composed as an official report is not strictly speaking an ego-document but does contain an individual perspective of the military situation. (Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. Ms. Hist. 815).

The potential

Approximately at the same time that the Hanoverians served in India, thousands of German troops from six German principalities served as auxiliary troops of the British Crown in North America. Their service began in 1776, shortly before the recruitment of the Hanoverians, and lasted until 1783, when the Hanoverians had just arrived in India. About twenty thousand were sent at the commencement of the war in 1776, with the total number of those who were recruited during the seven years of the conflict reaching up to thirty-eight thousand, although not all reached America. The German troops in North America represented a larger proportion of the British troops than did the Hanoverians in India. There the Hanoverians represented only a fraction of the total troops, both Indian and Europeans, but up to twenty-five percent when considering only the Europeans. The German troops in America represented about a third of the Crown troops, reaching at its peak up to forty percent (Conway 2014: 90-95, Krebs 2013:24). Similar to the Hanoverians in India, some of them began publishing their impressions in German periodicals already during their service. Nevertheless, the number of contemporary publications by members of these troops remained modest and is roughly equal to those by Hanoverian soldiers in India. A far larger number of manuscripts, including letters and diaries, written by German soldiers in North America are kept in archives in Germany and North America. According to Christof Mauch, “more than a thousand diaries and personal testimonies by German soldiers, including long letters are at our disposal” (Mauch 2003:412). These include, furthermore, not only texts written by officers but also by ordinary soldiers. Since the late nineteenth century, dozens of volumes of such texts have been published both in the original German and in English translations (for a bibliography see Haurert 2014:218-224). How can the small quantity of Hanoverian personal testimonies on the expedition to India – compared to the large number of such testimonies on the American war – be accounted for, even when taking the fact that the number of German troops sent to

America was more than ten times higher into account? One could argue that the strong political interest in the American Revolution in Germany led more soldiers to write down their impressions. But the almost equal number of contemporary publications by members of both expeditions speaks against this hypothesis. Christof Mauch and Lena Haunert believe that the main reason for the production of so many diaries by German soldiers in North America was the encounter with landscapes and societies so different from their own (Mauch 2003:412, Haunert 2014:4). This kind of incentive for writing would not have been any weaker among soldiers of the Hanoverian regiments in India. Their social composition was likewise similar to that of the German auxiliary troops in America. Another explanation would demand taking the much higher mortality rates of soldiers in India and the miserable health condition of many of the survivors into account. This consideration explains why most of the manuscripts by Hanoverians are from the first years of service in India. But this does not fully explain the difference in numbers between texts on India and America. It seems reasonable to assume that the strong political interest in the American Revolution did play a role, but this difference may have been reflected not so much in the number of texts written as by the effort put by professional and amateur historians to unearth them. More bluntly put, far less Hanoverian texts are known to us because interest in them was minimal compared to the interest in texts describing the American Revolution. Since German texts about the American Revolution are still being unearthed today (several important findings were made in the present century), it seems plausible that the vast majority of German personal manuscripts on the second Anglo-Mysore war remain unknown to us. Many of those that remained outside state archives may have been destroyed during the previous 230 years, but others may still be waiting to be discovered. As in the American case, these may well include manuscripts by ordinary soldiers and not just officers as is the case with the manuscripts known to us now, although admittedly manuscripts by ordinary soldiers, coming from less affluent families, were much less likely to survive.

Where are the manuscripts

Additional manuscripts by Hanoverian soldiers in India are most likely to be discovered in family collections. As indicated by Christof-Füchsle, two important sources for manuscripts on the Hanoverian expedition to India are indeed located in family collections in archives (in the Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv in Potsdam: Bestand 37 Herrschaft Neuhardenberg; in the Landesarchiv Thüringen - Staatsarchiv Gotha: Bestand 2-97-0958 Familie von Wangenheim). Other collections may be found in family possessions. The letters addressed to the Hessian army officer and official Georg Ernst von und zu Gilsa (1740-1798) by officers serving in America were recently discovered accidentally in family possession and delivered to the archive. (Gräf, 2010). During my work on the Hanoverian regiments, I made a few random attempts to unearth such manuscripts, writing to the members of two Hanoverian aristocratic families (von Wersebe and von Hinüber) that had ancestors among the officers in India. The gentlemen I approached replied that while they were well aware of the Indian adventure in the family past, they regretted that they had no pertinent documents. After having published a transcription of Peter Joseph du Plat's letter from India in the *Niedersächsisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte* (Tzoref-Ashkenazi 2018), I received a very friendly letter from a Lower Saxon aristocrat whose ancestor, Johann Wilhelm von Plato (1734-1783), had been

mentioned in du Plat's text. He attached transcripts of letters written by his ancestor on the way to India, adding that the family held longer, journal-like letters written by him. This incidence indicates the importance of having some luck, but also the importance of publicity in local venues for drawing the attention of the holders of the relevant papers.

Another case in point is that of Georg Friedrich Gaupp (1719-1798), who in 1750 raised in his home region of Baden one of the "Swiss" companies hired by the EIC, subsequently serving the EIC army in India between 1751 and 1760 and participating in the Carnatic wars and the battle of Plassey (1757). After returning to Germany he invested in a cotton factory, drawing on Indian technical knowledge. His son Ludwig wrote a detailed biography of his father based on his personal papers. Karl Hebster could still use this source for his articles on Gaupp written in the 1930s. The manuscript has since disappeared but could still be kept in family possession somewhere (Herbster 1930, Herbster 1936, Sander 2003:121-122). Other documents did survive. Papers related to Gaupp's factory are kept in the Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe (Bestand 212 Lörrach: Stadt, 18: Gewerbe). Gaupp also corresponded concerning Indian trade with Karoline Louise von Baden (1723-1783), wife of the margrave of Baden-Durlach, Karl Friedrich (1728-1811) (Meyer 1981). This correspondence is preserved in the Markgräfliches Familienarchiv in the Generallandesarchiv in Karlsruhe. (Bestand FA Nr. 5 A Corr 11). The mission archive of the Franckesche Stiftungen holds a letter by him to missionary Johann Philipp Fabricius (1711-1791 (AFSt/M 1 D 18:9) and a narrative by him of the war in Bengal in 1756 (AFSt/M 1 B 47:33).

Evaluating the sources

In his article "The Problem of Speech Genres" Michael Bakhtin distinguished between two kinds of utterances, which constitute the concrete and individual entities through which language is manifested. Daily dialogues and private letters are primary utterances. Secondary or complex utterances include all sorts of artistic, scientific and commentary texts, but also less sophisticated but more standardized texts such as all military and bureaucratic documents. While primary utterances are also part of an endless chain of speech, secondary utterances are part of a much more complex communication system. They are much more ideological, not in the political sense but in the sense of relating to a system of ideas (Bakhtin 1987). Applying this classification to the Hanoverian manuscripts on the second Anglo-Mysore war that were found in the archives, it seems that most of them should be regarded as secondary utterances. This is most obvious concerning the official documents such as military reports, including Schlegel's text, whose origin was as an official report. But it also holds for some of the personal letters and diaries. Du Plat's letter belongs most clearly to this category, being the extract of a letter to a relative in Germany of which a copy was found in Hardenberg's papers. This is a clear indication that the extract was prepared for the purpose of circulating among officers and other members of the Hanoverian social elite. This procedure was a common practice in the eighteenth century and was often applied to the letters arriving from India. The *Hannoverisches Magazin* even published calls for recipients of letters from India to hand them over to the periodical for publication. This means the officers writing letters home knew well that the letters would probably be read by a far wider readership than their addressees. This was especially true for letters that included much information of the kind that made them

suitable for circulation, as was the case of du Plat's letter. This does not mean that the letter does not include the personal perspective of the author, but it does mean that it belongs, to a large degree, to a public discourse in Hanover, and that the author would not write anything that might be politically sensitive. The letters of Ferdinand Breymann are, on the other hand, much more private and emotional, and much of their content unsuitable for circulation, and thus much closer to a primary utterance.

The diaries were much more under the control of their authors as long as they remained in their possession, but authors usually intended them to be read by a wider public, either in the family or beyond. Often, they were meant to serve as the basis for a travel book. Wangenheim's diary is rather concise. It includes short entries without long transgressions supplying comprehensive descriptions of India, but rather concentrating on the events of the day. The lack of long reflections could result from Wangenheim's many occupations as regiment commander or from him being accustomed to a military style as a long serving officer. But it does not mean that the journal was meant only for his personal use. De Roques' diary is different, in that it includes long transgressions with reflections on Indian society that indicate that this is a much less immediate text. It may well be that de Roques contemplated the possibility of publishing it after returning home, as some of his comrades did. The style, too, is at times quite literary, and in some places, such as his second thoughts about war in general, without questioning his own participation in the expedition to India, appear heavily influenced by the contemporary cultural trend of *Empfindsamkeit* (sentimentality). Therefore, it should be classed as a secondary utterance.

This does not mean that sources that are primary utterances are more valuable than secondary ones, but each allows for a different perspective of the situation to which they refer, a difference that should be considered when analyzing the sources. A different perspective is also what the German sources can offer us in general. Yet, what they supply is not necessarily a German perspective. They rather add a range of different perspectives to those afforded by British sources, be it the missionary perspective, the Hanoverian perspective, and sometimes a more general European perspective, besides multiple individual perspectives. In the case of the Hanoverian texts, the Hanoverian perspective is revealed for example when some of them narrate military action in a way that defends the performance of the Hanoverians or treat British interests in India in a distanced manner. A European perspective is highlighted when they regard colonial presence in India as affecting Europeans in general, as du Plat for example does. Their understanding of Indian society, while based on British information, also tends to reflect contemporary European images on India rather than more specific British notions constructed through colonial encounter.

Archival Holdings

Niedersächsisches Landesarchiv, Hannover

Bestand Kleine Erwerbungen

NLA HA 38 C Ostindische Regimenter

Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, Potsdam

Bestand 37 Herrschaft Neuhardenberg, Kr. Lebus –Akten (1211-1945)

Landesarchiv Thüringen - Staatsarchiv, Gotha

Bestand 2-97-0958: Familie von Wangenheim

Archiv der der Franckeschen Stiftungen zu Halle

Bestand: Missionsarchiv

AFSt/M 1 B 47

AFSt/M 1 D

Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe

Bestand 212 Lörrech: Stadt, 18: Gewerbe.

Bestand FA 5A Markgräfliches/Großherzogliches Familienarchiv, Karoline Louise, Markgräfin, Korrespondenz.

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