

DISAFFECTION IN THE REAR:
GERMAN TORIES IN THE WEST VIRGINIA MOUNTAINS

By KLAUS WUST

"It was at this time that the war amongst the inhabitants of the United States of North America had its beginning. I had several opportunities to go into military service. Since I was a little better educated than many others, I also could have been promoted to some agreeable position in the service. I even had some inclination to it, but since the idea worried my mother so much, I held off on her account, and I thank Divine Providence that such was the case."¹

This is how Paul Henkel of Upper Tract, now in Pendleton County, West Virginia, described his feelings in those fateful days in the winter of 1775/6 when the Reverend Peter Muhlenberg, Anglican parson and Lutheran pastor, was working hard to rally the Germans in the western parts of Virginia to the revolutionary cause. Henkel was 21 years old in 1775 and undecided as to what to do with his life. Like many of his neighbors he had just served for some fifty-six days in the local militia company of Captain John Harness when his home area was threatened by Indians.² The autobiographical introduction of his *Tagebuch* is silent about this brief brush with military life.

In 1781 the war came close to Paul Henkel's door again. By then he was married, the father of two small children and had begun to preach to a small local flock. Cornwallis was advancing from North Carolina and the Virginia authorities were ordering the backwoods counties to draft all available men:

"Fate ordained that I should be ordered by our government to enter military service for eighteen months. Since such was my lot, the officials gave the order that every one who had been drafted should be taken away at once. The regiment was supposed to march immediately to North Carolina. I had just arranged with some neighbors to begin work on a new house the very same day but the official said that the order was for me and others to proceed at once to Staunton. . . . As to myself, I did not really mind to serve. I would have done so but it seemed hard to me to leave my wife and children. I tried to hire someone to go instead of myself. I owned a small farm, fifty acres of good land, on which I kept a tenant who had been a regular soldier for years. He listened to my proposition without saying anything. I was decided not to serve as long as it could be avoided. The official, a young man, advised me to go away without being noticed. Toward nightfall I did so. There was a loft filled with hay on the small farm where I spent the night full of anxiety and sorrow."

During the night, Henkel claims, he had a dream in which his dead father told him to try the tenant again. So, in the morning, he returned to the man's house:

"As soon as I entered the house, the man offered to comply with my wish, asking merely that I provide his wife and children with shoes. The man and his wife could well afford to leave each other. She had been unfaithful to him during the winter, and gave good evidence of it. A fellow who had a wife and six children made off with her to the western parts in the following March."³

Three pairs of shoes seemed more than a fair bargain for eighteen months of soldiering, and Paul Henkel praised the Lord in whose service he was to enter soon as a candidate of the Lutheran ministry. Such candid revelations from the autobiographical notes of one of the more articulate inhabitants of the South Branch Valley, one who was to become the leading figure of the Lutheran Church in the southern states, certainly express a lack of the revolutionary and patriotic fervor for which the backwoodsmen have been cited time and again in our school texts. Paul Henkel's reaction, moreover, was not an isolated case of shirking patriotic duty. While young Henkel, as no doubt numerous others, was even advised by the local official to go into hiding, Major Thomas Posey reported to Colonel William Davies from Staunton on May 18, 1781:

"The number of men which I have collected at this place (in deserters and others) amount to twenty-one. The draft for eighteen months has not yet taken place in any of these back counties, neither can I inform you at what particular time it will."

The major expressed dismay that "the people seem much averse to it," though he doubted objectors were in the majority. His report continued:

"However, a considerable number met at the place appointed for laying of the Districts, and in a very bold and daring manner, seized the papers and destroyed them. I don't know where this may stop, if there is not a timely check, in Hanging a few, for examples to the rest."⁴

By 1781 as the conflict was dragging on and the fortunes of war changed, whatever enthusiasm for the revolt against England had existed in 1775, was replaced by a cooler assessment of the war. In the early stages the majority of the Germans in western Virginia had rallied behind the local leaders of the Revolution whose door to door canvas and recruiting efforts were concentrated mainly on the populous areas in the Shenandoah Valley. The sections to the west, comprising now the counties of Hardy, Grant and Pendleton in West Virginia, were too remote to be included in the massive, bilingual campaign conducted by members of the Committees of Safety and Correspondence. News trickled very slowly into the narrow vales and hollows along Lost River, Moorefield River and South Branch of the Potomac where numerous German-speaking neighborhoods existed among settlers of English and Scotch-Irish descent. All of these settlements had suffered great destruction and loss of life from Indian incursions ever since 1755. Most families had fled eastwards several times in the span of one generation. Throughout the Revolutionary War these communities remained threatened by Indian war parties which explains the reluctance of men to march off into far-away battlefields.

The combination of remoteness, lack of information and the Indian danger at their doors, caused many of the German settlers in the western mountains to show a lukewarm response at best to the many demands the authorities made on men and means. They had never failed to take up

arms in the defence of their neighborhoods. Neither had they actually ever felt oppressed by British colonial authority because for decades they had been very much left alone to fend for themselves.

To be sure, a number of young men from these German families had signed up for Peter Muhlenberg's German Regiment. They came mainly from the Romney area, the Hampshire county seat. Many others served time and again willingly in local ranger and militia units for stints brief enough to be back home at harvest time. In 1775 and 1776 there was practically no sign of concerted resistance anywhere in the mountain country on both sides of the South Branch. By 1777 the bitter realities of a drawn out war began to dawn on the people in the backwoods, cut off more than ever from outside supplies: "Everything was difficult to get. The times were generally dismal during the war, what with the Indians on the one side and the British on the other," Paul Henkel recalled of the first year after his marriage which took place in November 1776. He found it almost impossible to furnish his home.⁵ For others, doubts about the justification of the war arose, and a general discouragement felt everywhere had a different effect. They began to resist the tax collectors and recruiting officers, first subtly by avoidance, but soon by protesting openly. The initiative for overt resistance came more often than not from non-Germans who were, by sentiment or ignorance, loyal to the Crown.

The first organized band of armed loyalists surfaced not in the mountains but on Smith Creek in Rockingham County where one William Hinton and three Germans, Martin, Henry and John Groeder (Crider) raised a force of seventy-five men on behalf of the King. The local militia speedily dispersed this phantom army in August 1777. The leaders were sentenced to fines and prison terms of several years.⁶

In German neighborhoods in the western mountains resistance was at first not unlike that revenueurs encountered during Prohibition days in similar terrain. But after a while it bordered on guerrilla warfare. There were fugitive Tories from other sections, escaped prisoners-of-war, both British and Hessians, who were hiding out in the hills and who were persuading others to join them. Some operated out of a hollow still now known as Tory Camp Run (now in Randolph County, West Virginia).

From March 1779 on, the Rockingham court (Pendleton then still belonged to Rockingham County) frequently had to act on complaints received from patriotic informers, also bearing German names in many cases, about treasonable or disaffected activities of Germans. Anton Gartner and John Snider, accused of swearing to "join a company of black Boys" were acquitted as having been "inadvertently & innocently drawn into to join some idle-signing persons against the peace of the Commonwealth." On information provided by Jacob Plumb, Nicolas Weatherholtz was indicted for "conspiring & consulting the Destruction of the Commonwealth," and Henry Peninger "for speaking disrespectful and disgraceful words of the Congress." One of the witnesses against Peninger in March 1779 was Nicholas Seybert, kin to Charles Seybert, who had died as a soldier in Muhlenberg's regiment. The court usually released such offenders on high bail with neighbors acting as securities. In Peninger's case, Sebastian Hoover and Henry Stone served as such. Philip Akert, accused of "complotting & conspiring with several Enemies of the State," was bound to good behavior for a year and a day. Anton Gartner was back in court in May 1779 on an additional charge. In August court Henry Peninger gave information that one Gerard Erwin "propagated some News tending to raise Tumults & Seditions."⁷

Meanwhile, back in Pendleton, the Tories resorted to petty raids against informers and in some neighborhoods it looked as if armed resistance "fell within the verge of domestic war." During one of the sorties in April 1780, John Wilfong from Brushy Fork killed Sebastian Hoover. Wilfong was apprehended and promptly indicted for murder, found guilty, and sent to Richmond for trial. Henry Peninger, whose case had dragged on in the distant county court, disappeared before he could be sentenced. Finally the patriotic citizens took matters in their own hands. At Fort Seybert they apprehended a German Tory and, in the true style of trine immersion, dunked him three times in a still tub whereupon he was ready to swear loyalty to George Washington. This incident reportedly happened after the patriots felt emboldened by a quick and successful military action in the adjacent country to the north.⁸

The first information of a tense situation in Hampshire County reached Governor Thomas Jefferson in April 1781. County Lieutenant Garret Vanmeter had received orders from the governor to mobilize the county militia without delay and march some 240 Hampshire militia men to Williamsburg. Vanmeter, in a letter dated April 11. and dispatched by courier, explained to Jefferson why he apprehended difficulties in executing this order:

"I am sorry to inform your Excellency, that a dangerous insurrection has lately arisen in this County, occasioned by the execution of the late Acts of Assembly for recruiting this States Quota of Troops to serve in the Continental Army, and the Act for supplying the Army with Clothes, Provisions and Waggon: in consequence of which the Collector of the Tax under the former Act has been opposed in the Execution of his Duty, and has been obliged to desist from any further proceeding therein, and although every measure that prudence could suggest has been taken, to suppress the Rioters, yet it has proved ineffectual by reason of their having a superior force."⁹

Three days later Vanmeter reported to the governor that he felt unable to comply with the draft ordered by the State "by Reasons of the Disaffected people amongst us." A collector of supplies had been prevented from carrying out his task by a group of armed men. A certain John Claypole, after declaring that "they would not make up any Cloathes, Beef or Men," distributed liquor and all present "Drank King George the third's health and Damnation of Congress." Whereupon the sheriff marched with fifty men to the scene of resistance to serve warrants on Claypole and his associates. When the posse found themselves confronted by some sixty or seventy armed mountaineers, they prudently withdrew. Vanmeter added:

"I was Informed there was one hundred and fifty of them to Gether the next Day. I am informed there are several Deserters amongst those people. Some from the English Prisoners, some Eighteen Months men, and some Eight Months men, which they support and conceal."¹⁰

The incident took place in March. A number of the objectors began to waver after this first confrontation, causing Vanmeter prematurely to be "very Glad to hear the Mutineers Begin to see their Folly."¹¹ But instead, leaders of the insurgents now intensified their efforts to organize. Emissaries from the British who had infiltrated through the Indian country were suspected to be behind the campaign to harass the patriotic authorities. The effective leadership, however, was provided by men of local

prominence, John Claypole, a Scotchman, and John Brake, a German. Claypole had a large farm on Lost River. Brake, an old man of considerable wealth, was influential among his fellow Germans. He had settled on Moorefield River before the French and Indian War. His wife was killed during one of the Indian raids and his son, Jacob, spent several years in Indian captivity.¹²

In a territory stretching from Royal Glen Gap west of Petersburg to what is now the Virginia line, some fifty-five miles wide, and extending for many miles north and south in the valleys of South Branch, Moorefield and Lost rivers, the insurgents recruited their force and took up positions. Their place of rendezvous was Brake's plantation, about fifteen miles south of Moorefield. The objective was, if we may believe the word of militia Colonel John Smith of Frederick County, to march off in a body toward the British in the event of their advancing into the Shenandoah Valley or near it.¹³ There was no longer simply the question of a defence against what they believed to be undue demands of their government.

Hampshire County Lieutenant Vanmeter did not take the matter lightly after he learned of the extent of preparations in the insurgent area. The farmers had stopped supplying meat and grain to areas inhabited by patriots. On May 21 his militia marched to Micheal Stump's "made a halt, and sent a party of light Horse to see what Discoveries they could make about Jacob Brake's Mill on the South Fork. They were repuls'd by a fire & got off without any Loss, & brought with them two prisoners—they can't make any Discovery of the number of the Enemy. I understand by one Powel who came from Claypoles, on the Lost River (the Commander of the Tories), that he expected by last night to command one thousand men." Knowing his militia outnumbered, Vanmeter immediately appealed to the militia commands of the adjoining counties of Frederick, Berkeley and Shenandoah: "The welfare of our wives & children seems greatly to depend upon your Immediate Assistance," and added in a post-script: "Let the men be officer'd & well arm'd." He asked specifically to prevail upon General Daniel Morgan to join the forces because "they are daily daring him."¹⁴

Morgan, the legendary hero, was indeed willing to take command as he was home on a rest leave on his farm Saratoga in Frederick County. Colonel John Smith gathered a force of four hundred men from the three counties. Many of them were combat veterans of the early battles of the Revolution, and many were Germans at that. Colonel Jacob Rinker's regiment from Shenandoah was almost entirely composed of Germans, several of them like himself veterans of Muhlenberg's Eighth Virginia Regiment.

Less than a month after Vanmeter's appeal for help, the force left Winchester and, instead of heading for the Moorefield area where the local militia had run into resistance, Morgan went straight to the house of the Tory commander and by surprise took Claypole prisoner. There was very little bloodshed. As several men fled across Claypole's meadow, William Baker, a young German, was wounded when he refused to give himself up. After this success the troops, by then in high spirits, moved up Lost River. Some young fellows in the vanguard captured another German, Mathias Wilkins, placed a rope around his neck and threatened to hang him when Colonel Smith happened on the scene and gave orders to desist. Another prisoner had his posteriors branded with a red hot spade. After cleaning up the Tories nests on Lost River, Morgan's army crossed South Branch Mountain. Near the summit they routed a dozen Tories in a hunter's cabin,

among them an elderly man named Mac who surrendered meekly. A half-drunk Irishman, Morgan's former orderly, shot the poor man dead, the only fatality of the entire campaign.¹⁵

The sweep-up operation then was continued along Moorefield River. Colonel Smith must have told the occupation of John Brake's rather stately home with particular relish to judge from Samuel Kercheval's rendition of his account:

"The army proceeded on to pay their respects to Mr. John Brake . . . Morgan marched his army to his residence, they halted, and spent two days and nights with his reluctant host. His troops lived on the best his fine farm, mill and distillery afforded, &c., while their horses fared no less luxuriously upon his fine unmowed meadows, oat fields, &c. As Brake had entertained and feasted the Tories, Morgan concluded that he should feast them in turn."

The following day the troops moved down the river past Moorefield and returned to Winchester, about ten days after they had left.

Vanmeter's own militia, one company as "Mounted Infantry" and three companies on foot, was equally successful. Their opponents "dispersed with precipitation—only a few surrendered and a few taken prisoners." Of three men named as principal conspirators only Michael Boulger was a German.¹⁷ In a letter to Governor Thomas Nelson in November 1781, while admitting that a few of "the deluded wretches" still remained at large, Vanmeter explained that he was unable to try delinquents because he lacked copies of the new Militia Law and the Articles of War, and that, moreover, he was resigning his commission on account of declining health.¹⁸ At the special court trial set for Claypole and others on July 10th, "the Gentlemen nominated as Judges by the Hon'ble Board failing to attend, the prosecution was postponed." General Morgan interceded on behalf of Claypole and so did no less than fifty-seven officers, judges and other prominent citizens of Hampshire, Frederick and Shenandoah counties in one of numerous petitions.¹⁹

In his own petition for pardon, signed also by his two German "lieutenants," Mathias and George Wilkins, John Claypole reiterated that

"living in an obscure and remote corner of the State, [they] are precluded from every Intelligence of the State of affairs, either by Public Papers or from Information of Men of Credit and Veracity, and at the same time infested by the wicked Emissaries or pretended Emissaries of the British who travel through all parts of the Frontiers . . ."

The petitioners then cited the levies and taxes which excited their displeasure and made them prone to believe "those wicked and designing men . . . and take up Arms in defence of what those wretches called their Liberty." Morgan's campaign changed all that:

"And when your petitioners were made sensible of their Error, by the Gentlemen from the Adjacent Counties, who marched a body of men sufficient to have put all the disobedient & deluded crew to the Sword, but from motives of humanity & prudence attempted the more mild method of Arguments to dispel the delusion, and bring them back to their duty, your Petitioners readily gave up their Arms and engaged to deliver themselves to Justice and submit to the Lays of their Country when called for; which they have since done. . . ."²⁰

Similar arguments were offered by the twenty-seven other Tories who were still under indictment. Of this group, all but five were Germans:

Jacob Brake, Adam Rodebaugh, John Mace, Michael Algire, Isaac Brake, John Mitchell, Samuel Lourie, Leonard Hier, Jacob Hier, George Peck, John Casner, Jacob Yeazle, Thomas Nutler, Thomas Stacey, John Rodebaugh, Henry Rodebaugh, Jacob House, Jeremiah Ozburn, Jacob Crites, Anthony Reager, Josiah Ozburn, George Sites, Charles Borrer, Jacob Pickle, John Wease, Adam Wease and Adam Wease, Jr.²¹

While these petitioners were waiting for clemency which, by the way, was soon forthcoming, a number of young ex-Tories from South Branch were fighting at Yorktown. In this manner they avoided all prosecution and restored their tainted reputation. For the others, the changed atmosphere in the elation over Cornwallis' surrender brought forgiveness and restoration of civil rights. Some bitterness lingered on between families in these closely-knit neighborhoods but by and large the "late insurrection" was recalled with certain amusement after the war. It featured decades later in pension applications of revolutionary veterans as a military campaign. Thus Jacob Surber, a German volunteer from Shenandoah County, listed among his military exploits in Rinker's regiment the dispersal of the "Tories assembled at Capon Gap, four of them wounded and captured."²²

There was even to be a belated patriotic fervor in the second half of 1781 along the South Branch. It caused Valentine Power, "minister of the Duncard order" considerable trouble with his church, the German Baptist Brethren or Dunkers. Some families of the Dunker faith had lived on South Branch since the early 1750's. A few among them were drawn into the Tory movement and after its collapse Valentine and his brother Martin vied with others to prove their devotion to the American cause, seriously compromising their Dunker principles of non-violence and opposition to swearing an oath. Valentine Power defended his newly acquired convictions in a letter to the Annual Meeting of the Brethren in May 1785. He was rebuked and a committee was sent to South Branch to try to sway the errant members. This mission remained evidently without success because the Annual Meeting of 1790 had to deal with the situation in the South Branch church again. After citing Valentine Power in particular, the Meeting plainly stated: ". . . but if there were one among us that had such a conscience that he could fight and swear oaths, such a person would not be one of us." Power continued to serve as a minister until his death in 1823, switching to the Methodists after he was excluded from the Brethren fellowship.²³

The Tory uprising on South Branch was but an insignificant episode in the war. The considerable number of Germans involved shows how much actions and reactions of people are determined by their immediate environment. Among their brothers in the much more accessible Shenandoah Valley, a few miles to the east, Tory sentiment was almost non-existent and open opposition to the war was largely limited to a small group of religious conscientious objectors.²⁴ The handling of the disaffected on South Branch by the authorities and by the military commanders—swift, determined military action followed by leniency and persuasion—was admirable in view of the outcome. It prevented the disruption of a frontier community grown together in four decades of hardship. Daniel Morgan, Gerrit Vanmeter and Jacob Rinker knew their mountain people well.

¹ Paul Henkel (1754-1825) later became one of the leading Lutheran ministers in the South. His earliest *Tagebuch* (MS at Gettysburg Theological Seminary) consists of an autobiographical introduction to 1782 and actual diary notes covering 1783-89. It is presently being published in instalments under the editorship of Mary Harter in *Henckel Genealogical Bulletin*. The quote here is from Vol. IV (1873), 152.

² Romney and Winchester Pay Rolls. E. L. Judy, *History of Grant and Hardy Counties, West Virginia* (Petersburg, W. Va., 1951), 220.

³ *Henckel Geneal. Bulletin*, V (1974), 185-6.

⁴ *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts . . .*, ed. by William P. Palmer *et al.* Richmond, 1875-93), II, 107.

⁵ *Henckel Geneal. Bulletin*, V (1974), 184.

⁶ John W. Wayland, "Loyal to the King," *Rockingham Recorder*, II (1958), 79-84.

⁷ "First Minute Book of Rockingham County Court," *Rockingham Recorder*, I (1945-48), 147, 150, 225-6, 231, 282; II (1958), 77.

⁸ Oren F. Morton, *A History of Pendleton County, West Virginia* (Dayton, Va., 1910), 62-4. Morton found in his research that "the Tories in what is now Pendleton county were numerous and chiefly German." Samuel Kercheval, *A History of the Valley of Virginia*, ed. by Oren F. Morton (Strasburg, Va., 1925), 146n.

⁹ *Cal. Va. State Papers*, II, 28-9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 40-1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹² Nothing is known about Brake's origins in Germany. A John Jasper Brake, 40 years old, arrived in Philadelphia in October 1748. (Ralph Beaver Strassburger and Wilhelm John Hinke, *Pennsylvania German Pioneers* [Norristown, Pa., 1934], I, 387). That would have made John Brake 73 years old in 1781. There is no record to substantiate local and family claims as to his having been a German nobleman. (Lucillus V. McWhorten, *Border Settlers of Northwestern Virginia* [Hamilton, Ohio, 1915], 310 ff.). See also Kercheval, 92, 144-9 and Judy, 35. 50-1. The early Hampshire County records and German church records of the period have not been preserved.

¹³ Kercheval, 145.

¹⁴ *Cal. Va. State Papers*, II, 113-4.

¹⁵ Kercheval, 146-6. Kercheval's account is based on his extensive interviews with Colonel John Smith and other eyewitnesses.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁷ *Cal. Va. State Papers*, II, 163.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 624-5.

¹⁹ Petition of Stephen Ruddle et al. in Judy, 219-20.

²⁰ *Cal. Va. State Papers*, II, 682-3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, II, 686.

²² John W. Wayland, *A History of Shenandoah County, Virginia* (Strasburg, Va., 1927), 652.

²³ The Powers (Bauers) settled in the South Branch Valley in the 1750's. As a young man, Valentine Powers spent five or six years in Indian captivity. (Kercheval, 90; Judy, 178). For his role as a Dunker minister and the censure by Annual Meetings see Donald F. Durnbaugh (ed.), *The Brethren in Colonial America* (Elgin, Ill., 1967), 355-8. Powers' will is recorded in Hardy County Will Book III, 235.

²⁴ Only a single case of treasonable conduct involving a German was ever brought before the Shenandoah County court. In July 1779 Christian Kibler was denounced by Barbara Derting and Mohail Hommelt and therupon indicted on "Suspicion of Speaking Treason against the United States." Mennonites Jacob Hiestand and Benjamin Schuh were his securities. (Shenandoah County Minute Book 1774-80, 108). The disposition of the case is not known since the early order book is lost.