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SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

Foreigners in the Prussian Army, 1713–56: Some Statistical and Interpretive Problems

WILLERD R. FANN

IT is often assumed, especially in the Anglo-American literature, that Frederick William I (1713–40), by establishing the “canton system” in 1733, lessened his need to rely on foreign mercenaries for military manpower and moved in the direction of a national, conscript army. As put by Robert Ergang: “The establishment of this so-called ‘canton system’ not only assured . . . a large permanent supply of recruits; it was also a long step toward making the Prussian army a national one. Recruiting abroad was still continued, but it was only supplementary. Native recruits now formed the backbone of the Prussian army.”¹ This persistent assumption, stated in different ways by different authors, has even penetrated the textbook literature.² A closely related assumption holds that Frederick the Great after 1740, by increasing the proportion of foreign manpower to as much as two-thirds of the total, “reversed” the trend toward making the army more national in character.³ The purpose of this essay will be to demonstrate that both of the above-mentioned assumptions are false; they

1. R. Ergang, *The Potsdam Führer* (New York, 1941), 77.

2. E.g., H. Rosinski, *The German Army*, 2d ed. (London, 1940), 18; W. Shanahan, *Prussian Military Reforms, 1786–1813* (New York, 1945), 39; G. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640–1945* (New York, 1956), 10, 12, 23; W. Bruford, “The Organization and Rise of Prussia,” in *The New Cambridge Modern History* (Cambridge, 1957), 7: 295; W. Hubatsch, *Frederick the Great of Prussia* (London, 1975), 32; H. Johnson, *Frederick the Great and His Officials* (New Haven, 1975), 27; H. Koch, *A History of Prussia* (London, 1978), 87–88; S. Ross, *From Flintlock to Rifle: Infantry Tactics, 1740–1866* (London, 1979), 20; K. Schwieger, “Militär und Bürgertum,” in D. Blasius, ed., *Preussen in der deutschen Geschichte* (Königstein/Ts, 1980), 184; J. Childs, *Armies and Warfare in Europe, 1648–1789* (New York, 1982), 52; a textbook example is M. Chambers et al., *The Western Experience* (New York, 1974), 2: 632.

3. Rosinski, 26–27; Craig, 22; F. Redlich, *The German Military Enterpriser and His Work Force* (Wiesbaden, 1964), 2: 201; J. Luvaas, *Frederick the Great on the Art of War* (New York, 1966), 31; cf. H. Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (Winchester, Mass., 1983), 9.

depend on a misunderstanding of the real trends in Prussian recruiting bolstered, in the latter case, by faulty statistics.

To describe the Prussian army, at any time, as a "national" army creates a conceptual problem. In the sense that most of its soldiers were natives, it was always a "national" army. But it also always had a foreign component. Insofar as one may use the term, the Prussian army was most pronouncedly "national" during Frederick William's early years. Foreigners were least numerous, and the least emphasis was placed on foreign recruiting.⁴ This is not to say that foreign recruiting was ever unimportant or that foreigners were ever a negligible factor. Even in 1713 they may have constituted as much as 20 percent of the army.⁵ Given the conventional wisdom of the times (that foreign recruits made it possible to spare domestic manpower for productive purposes), there would seem to have been obvious incentives for Prussia, with its relatively small population, to favor foreign recruiting. Frederick William always welcomed suitable foreign recruits, but during his first years foreign recruiting was not systematic policy. It remained, as it had been prior to 1713, a useful supplement to domestic recruiting. The rapid expansion of the army was achieved primarily by exploiting native manpower. By the time that foreign recruiting became systematic policy, after 1720, Frederick William's army had attained almost 75 percent of its ultimate size. Even in the 1720s domestic sources continued to furnish the majority of recruits.⁶

4. The point is not always understood; e.g., see Craig, 12, 23; Hubatsch, 32.

5. No formal distinction between "natives" and "foreigners" was made before 1740. Estimates of the number of foreigners before that date have to be based on interpretation of recruiting patterns and a few fragments of statistical evidence, such as the muster roll of the *Leibkompagnie* of the Dohna regiment for May 1715, which shows 21 percent foreigners among the enlisted men. R. Kopka von Lossow, *Geschichte des Grenadier-Regiments König Friedrich I. (4. ostpreussischen) Nr. 5* (Berlin, 1889–1901), 2: 73*–76*. One company, of course, does not necessarily typify the whole army. Some regiments did little or no foreign recruiting until the 1720s; the artillery, as a matter of policy, had no foreigners. W. Venohr's estimates for 1720 (ca. 27 percent) and 1730 (ca. 33 percent) seem too high; his figure for the number of foreign recruits between 1713 and 1738 (18,000) is impossibly low. *Der Soldatenkönig: Revolutionär auf dem Thron* (Frankfurt/Main and Berlin, 1988), 143, 153.

6. On recruiting before 1713, see R. Schrötter, "Die Ergänzung des preussischen Heeres unter dem ersten Könige," *Forschungen zur brandenburgischen und preussischen Geschichte* 23 (1910): 403–67; C. Jany, *Geschichte der preussischen Armee*, 2d ed. (Osnabrück, 1967), 1: 546–79. For recruiting after 1713, see Jany, 1: 679–718. To some extent, Jany corrected the pioneering work of M. Lehmann, "Werbung, Wehrpflicht, und Beurlaubung unter Friedrich Wilhelm I.," *Historische Zeitschrift* 67 (1891): 254–89. M. Jähns, *Geschichte der Kriegswissenschaften* (Munich and Leipzig, 1889–91), 2: 1547–73, gives a good survey of the documentary evidence, but should not be read without reference to Jany.

Neither a desire for additional numbers nor conventional concerns to husband native manpower were the sole or even the primary incentives behind the increased interest in foreign recruiting during the 1720s. What compelled the Prussian army to systematize foreign recruiting was a more unconventional consideration, namely the king's well-known passion for tall soldiers. The king's obsession became his regimental and company chiefs' obsession, *ex officio*. Their career prospects depended on being able to exhibit uniformly tall regiments and companies at royal reviews. It was advisable, on such occasions, to have on hand a man or two tall enough to be chosen for the King's Regiment. It was essential to show "improvement," that is, an increased average height compared to preceding reviews. "In particular," said the regulations, "the chiefs and commanders of the regiments should keep after those captains who have bad companies, so that from year to year they will improve their companies as much as possible."⁷

Frederick William defined the difference between "good" and "bad" companies in terms of height. In a "good" musketeer company he wanted the minimum average to be nearly 5'10". In a "bad," but "still passable," company the minimum average was to be 5'9". Cavalrymen were also expected to be tall. In a "good" squadron of dragoons the minimum average was to be more than 5'9"; in a "middling" squadron, 5'8½". In both the infantry and the cavalry, the smallest man was to be at least 5'7".⁸ Table 1 illustrates how selective the requirements were. It classifies the native manpower of two infantry cantons, Hacke (1783) and Diericke (1805), in terms of height. It is not possible to find such comprehensive data from the time of Frederick William I, but I assume that no significant anthropological change had taken place since the 1730s.⁹

7. *Reglement vor die königl. preussische Infanterie* (Potsdam, 1726 [Repr.: Osnabrück, 1968]), 552.

8. All measurements have been converted to English feet and inches. The Prussian standard of measurement was the Rhenish foot, equivalent to 1.03 English feet. The figures given above have been extrapolated from the specifications in the so-called *Werbereglement* of 1732 for the Infantry and Dragoons: "Disposition und Ordres, wornach die Königl. Preuss. Infanterie Regimenter von dato d. 1. 8br. 1732 wegen der Werbung sich zu verhalten haben sollen," *Militair-Wochenblatt* 26 (1841): 82–83; K. Tyszka, *Geschichte des königl. preussischen 1sten Dragoner-Regiments* (Rastenburg, 1837), 438.

9. Data are taken from B. v. Bagensky, *Regimentsbuch des Grenadier-Regiments König Friedrich Wilhelm IV. (1. pommerschen) Nr. 2, von 1679–1891* (Berlin, 1892), 52–53, 56–57; and Kopka von Lossow, 2: 139*, 144*. The figures for Hacke include cantonists between 15 and 40, for Diericke between 18 and 40. The canton of the Diericke regiment was located in Masuria and New East Prussia where the average stature (column A) of the population was less than that of the core

TABLE 1

Height	A % of Cantonists (inc. soldiers)		B Soldiers as % of Height Group		C % of Native Soldiers	
	Hacke	Dier.	Hacke	Dier.	Hacke	Dier.
Over 5'10"	1.3	0.6	100.0	95.5	11.7	7.7
5'10"	1.8	1.1	99.3	93.2	16.7	14.9
5'9"	3.6	3.0	96.5	82.6	31.5	34.3
5'8"	4.3	4.5	88.4	62.3	35.1	34.6
5'7"	6.5	4.7	8.3	14.4	5.0	8.5
Under 5'7"	82.5	86.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

Column A groups cantonists, including soldiers, according to their height. In the canton of the Hacke regiment, less than 18 percent of the eligible manpower measured 5'7" or more. In the canton of the Diericke regiment less than 14 percent met that standard. Column B shows how the regiments utilized nearly all of the tall men in their cantons. It also illustrates how small stature could serve as a de facto exemption from military service in peacetime. Column C shows that the emphasis on stature persisted until the last days of the Old-Prussian army. The average height of the native soldiers in both regiments was 5'9", "passable" even by Frederick William's strict standards.

As these figures suggest, it was not a shortage of manpower, as such, but anthropological reality that caused the Prussians to look for foreign recruits.¹⁰ The domestic reserves of tall men had finite limits. As early as 1716–17 the growing scarcity of tall men was forcing seekers of royal favors to substitute gifts of cannon in lieu of the customary tall recruits.¹¹ For the captains there was no substitute for

provinces. The apparent differences in manpower utilization (column B) are due to different sized cantons. Columns B and C do not take into account the "Third Battalion," consisting of shorter men and semi-invalids, of the Diericke regiment. At the time of Frederick William I or Frederick the Great such personnel would have been grouped in separate garrison battalions.

10. For contemporary views, see K. Beneckendorff, *Karakterzüge aus dem Leben König Friedrich Wilhelm I.* (Berlin, 1787–89), 3: 76–77, 88–89; D. Fassmann, *Leben und Thaten des . . . Königs von Preussen Friederici Wilhelmi* (Hamburg, 1735–41), 1: 722–23, 781.

11. E. Friedlaender, ed., *Berliner geschriebene Zeitungen aus den Jahren 1713 bis 1717* (Berlin, 1902), 537, 613–14.

the genuine article. If further “improvement” was to take place, they were compelled to look beyond the frontier. In the early 1720s it became standard practice to send recruiting parties abroad each year. An elaborate machinery came into existence to carry on foreign recruiting.

The connection between the growth of foreign recruiting and the pressure for “improvement” needs to be stressed. Otherwise, it might logically be assumed that the primary purpose of foreign recruiting was to maintain the numerical strength of the army.¹² Foreign recruiting, of course, did produce a large number of recruits. But if mere numbers had been Frederick William’s primary concern, he could have found the required numbers at home without having to accept the enormous expense and diplomatic complications that accompanied foreign recruiting; or he could have recruited a much larger number of foreigners (at less expense and with fewer diplomatic problems) simply by scaling down the height requirements.¹³ For him, however, numbers were less important than quality. As he wrote: “You can find enough runts [*Krop*] anywhere.”¹⁴ The endlessly repeated cliché that Frederick William built the fourth largest army in Europe, in a country with only the twelfth largest population, should be re-examined in this light. The usual implication is that the size of the army was the maximum possible, given his limited resources. But that was not the case. The army could easily have been larger if its size had not been restricted by the king’s obsession with the size of the soldiers.¹⁵ Table 2, which compares the patterns of recruitment, desertion, and discharges in the infantry, can illustrate this point.¹⁶

12. Presumably, if the canton system gave the army “a national basis which it had not had before” (Craig) or if native recruits “now formed the backbone of the Prussian army” (Ergang), one has to conclude that foreigners were the numerical backbone of the army before 1733. It would seem logical, also, to assume that the canton system was a response to the failure of foreign recruiting to keep up the strength of the army. See Craig, 8–10, 12; Ergang, 72–77; Rosinski, 17–18; Childs, 52; Koch, 87–89; Redlich, 2: 180–82.

13. Frederick the Great did just that after 1740. He, too, preferred tall soldiers, but he was willing to compromise in order to get more recruits at a cheaper price per head. See *Die politischen Testamente Friedrichs des Grossen*, ed. G. Volz (Berlin, 1920), 146–47; *Mittheilungen aus dem Archiv des königlichen Kriegsministeriums* (Berlin, 1891–95), 1: 21; Beneckendorff, 3: 90.

14. *Acta Borussica: Ergänzungsband*, “Die Briefe König Friedrich Wilhelms I. an den Fürsten Leopold zu Anhalt-Dessau, 1704–1740,” ed. O. Krauske (Berlin, 1905), 496; cf. 247.

15. The obsession with tall men, of course, had practical roots in a striving for tactical perfection. Infantrymen had to be reasonably tall in order to handle the long musket effectively. See H. Bleckwenn, *Unter dem Preussen-Adler: Das brandenburgisch-preussische Heer, 1640–1807* (Munich, 1978), 63–65.

16. Data are taken from “Mittheilungen aus dem Archive des königlichen Kriegsminis-

TABLE 2

<i>Annual Avg.</i>	<i>A</i> <i>Recruited</i>	<i>B</i> <i>Deserted</i>	<i>C</i> <i>Discharged</i>
1713-20	6657	1966	3312*
1721-30	2789	553	1348
1731-40	2690	367	707

*1714-20

As shown by columns A and B, the need for manpower was much greater during the years 1713-20 than at any later time. These were the years when desertion was most serious and during which the most rapid numerical expansion was taking place (by 1720 the infantry had attained almost 80 percent of its ultimate strength). As shown by column C, however, these were the same years in which the discharge rate was also the greatest. Thus during the years when there was the greatest need for manpower, the king was willing to discharge a larger number of men than at any later period. The primary motive was his insistence that the companies show "improvement." At inspections he sometimes dismissed whole blocs of undersized men.¹⁷ Pressure for "improvement" continued unabated until 1740, but the number of discharges diminished because the regiments grew taller and fewer "runts" had to be culled out of the ranks.

Some historians see the introduction of the canton system as evidence of a failure of foreign recruiting to maintain the army's numerical strength.¹⁸ As I have stressed, however, it was never the primary purpose of foreign recruiting to supply mere numbers. The connec-

teriums, III; *Statistische Nachrichten über die Armee Friedrich Wilhelms I.*, *Militär-Wochenblatt* 76 (1891): 1031-36. The large number of men who merely changed status through promotion or transfer from one unit to another were counted as being both "discharged" and "recruited" in the monthly lists. Thus the true number of men recruited or discharged was less than these figures indicate. The frequent assertion that 20 percent of the soldiers had to be discharged annually because of old age or invalidity has been shown to be false. See W. Fann, "Peacetime Attrition in the Army of Frederick William I, 1713-1740," *Central European History* 11 (1978): 323-34.

17. Friedlaender, 56, 240, 646; "Wie es unter König Friedrich Wilhelm I. gewesen," *Der Soldaten-Freund* 40 (1872-73): 353.

18. See above, n. 12.

tion between foreign recruiting and the introduction of the canton system was actually more subtle. It lay in the circumstance that foreign recruiting, expensive at any time, was made doubly so because the tall men desired by the king commanded premium prices on the military labor market. The costs could only be met by furloughing part of the soldiers and allowing the company chiefs to use the pay of the furloughed men for recruiting purposes. As early as 1714 Frederick William had authorized furloughing on a limited scale. Later, he allowed an increase both in the number of men who could be furloughed and in the length of the furloughs. Finally, furloughing became an essential part of the canton system. After a period of training, the native soldiers were sent home on furlough, subject to being recalled each year for a three-month *Exerzierzeit*.¹⁹

In this sense, then, the introduction of the canton system did respond to the imperatives of foreign recruiting. It also greatly enhanced the importance of the foreigners. When it became fixed practice to furlough the natives for most of the year, the foreigners became essential for overall efficiency. For nine months of the year, they constituted the majority of trained men in the garrisons. They made it easier to train the newly conscripted cantonists and to refresh the skills of the furloughed men called in for the annual *Exerzierzeit*. Without the veteran foreigners it would not have been possible to furlough the natives without diminishing the proficiency in drill which gave the Prussian army a qualitative edge over other armies. Thus it is a mistake to assume that the canton system made foreign recruiting “only supplementary” after 1733. Exactly the opposite was true. Coupled with the king’s continuing passion for tall soldiers (which reached “scarcely believable” proportions during the 1730s), the canton system generated a need for more foreigners.²⁰

By the time that Frederick the Great came to the throne, the foreign component was attaining an unprecedented size: close to 40 percent of the enlisted strength.²¹ During the very years when the canton

19. On the development of the canton system and on furloughing, see Jany, 1: 679–700, 707–9.

20. “Scarcely believable”: *Oeuvres de Frédéric le Grand* (Berlin, 1846–57), 1: 193 (hereinafter: *Oeuvres*).

21. According to Frederick, out of a total strength of 76,000, 26,000 (34.2 percent) were foreigners, hence the frequent statement that foreigners constituted one-third of the army in 1740. It should be understood, however, that Frederick was referring only to the number of

system was taking shape the Prussian army was losing its “national” character. It became what Frederick approvingly called a “mixed force,” in which both natives and foreigners played essential, mutually supporting roles.²² After the impressive successes of the “mixed force” during the First Silesian War (1740–42), Frederick instructed the regiments to increase the proportion of foreign privates to two-thirds, a stipulation reiterated in the new regulations of 1743.²³ These instructions are the source of the incorrect assumption that Frederick “reversed” a promising trend toward a “national” army initiated by his father. As we have seen, however, no such trend existed. Where Frederick did make a reversal was in priorities. Whereas Frederick William had seen foreign recruiting primarily as a vehicle for “improvement,” Frederick saw foreign recruiting primarily as a means to keep up the strength of the army while sparing domestic manpower for productive pursuits.²⁴ These altered priorities, of course, were logical responses to the nature of the canton system and to the success of the “mixed force.”

The instructions of 1742–43 are also the source of the frequently encountered assertion that foreigners comprised two-thirds of the Prussian army. In fact, at no time during the eighteenth century did foreigners constitute so large a part of the army. Another incorrect and frequently encountered assertion, which originated with Droysen, holds that such a proportion was at least approximated: “Of the 132,000 men who comprised the army in 1751, probably not more than 50,000 were natives.”²⁵ Droysen’s “probable” number of natives was extrapolated from Frederick’s recommendations, in the Political Testament of 1752, that no more than sixty privates in an infantry company and thirty privates in a cavalry company should be natives.²⁶ Droysen’s conclusion is incorrect because he overlooked the fact that

foreign privates, whereas part of the N.C.O.’s and musicians were also foreigners. *Oeuvres*, 2: 1. Frederick’s figures do not include the nearly 5,000 men of the militia (“New Garrisons”). See Jany, 1: 660.

22. *Oeuvres*, 8: 216–17.

23. *Friedrich der Grosse: Militärische Schriften*, ed. A. v. Taysen (Berlin, 1883), 493, 494; *Reglement vor die königl. preussische Infanterie* (Berlin, 1743 [Repr.; Osnabrück, 1976]), 573.

24. See above, n. 13; *Oeuvres*, 8: 216–17; *Die politischen Testamente Friedrichs des Grossen*, 138–40.

25. J. Droysen, *Geschichte der preussischen Politik* (Leipzig, 1868–86), 5/3: 18. Cf. E. Dette, *Friedrich der Grosse und Sein Heer* (Göttingen, 1914), 16; Rosinski, 27; Luvaas, 31; C. Duffy, *The Army of Frederick the Great* (New York, 1974), 55; Ross, 19–20; Childs, 47.

26. *Die politischen Testamente Friedrichs des Grossen*, 83.

the remaining manpower of a company included not only foreign privates but also the *Prime Plane* (officers, N.C.O.'s, musicians, supernumeraries). The percentage of foreign privates would have been 48 percent in the infantry and 55 percent in the cavalry according to Frederick's recommendations, and even those goals were not attained in practice.

Although the percentage of foreigners reached a high point under Frederick the Great, the actual increase was less dramatic than literal interpretation of the regulations or acceptance of Droysen's erroneous calculation would suggest. By the most reliable estimate, that of Jany, foreigners still constituted appreciably less than 50 percent of Prussian manpower prior to the Seven Years' War.²⁷ Since foreigners had already constituted close to 40 percent of the enlisted manpower in 1740, the increase in the percentage of foreigners between 1740 and 1756 was relatively modest. In fact, the proportional increase in foreign manpower was considerably larger under Frederick William I than it was under Frederick the Great.

It should be apparent from this brief discussion that there was a fairly simple and consistent trend in Prussian recruiting policy between 1713 and 1756. An ever-increasing reliance was placed on foreign manpower. Only the reasons for that reliance changed after 1733. To assume that the canton system made foreign recruiting "only supplementary" or that Frederick the Great "reversed" a trend toward a more "national" army distorts the real tendencies of Prussian recruiting. Such views, perhaps, reflect an inclination to view the Old-Prussian army from nineteenth-century perspectives, that is, to see the canton system as logically pointing toward a citizen army based on universal military service. From a broad historical viewpoint this may be true, but from the viewpoint of the Prussian kings it would not have been logical to develop the canton system in that direction. For both Frederick William and Frederick the Great, the canton system was an efficient way to regulate domestic recruiting, not a harbinger of the nation in arms.

27. Jany, 2: 240-41.