



*The Iron Princess: Amalia Elisabeth
and the Thirty Years War,*
Tryntje Helfferich
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University
Press, 2013).

Review by: Martin Spies

The Iron Princess: Amalia Elisabeth and the Thirty Years War. By Tryntje Helfferich. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-6740-7339-5. 319 pp. £25.

The *Iron Princess* is a fitting title for Tryntje Helfferich's book on Amalia Elisabeth of Hesse-Cassel (1602–1651), the young widow of Landgrave Wilhelm V (1602–1637) and mother of the eight-year-old Wilhelm VI (1629–1663), as whose regent she led Hesse-Cassel against all odds through the final years of the Thirty Years War. Born a Countess of Hanau-Münzenberg, Amalia Elisabeth was related to many of Europe's ruling families: her mother was a daughter of William of Orange, the leader of the Dutch revolt, and his third (not first) wife Charlotte of Bourbon-Montpensier, a distant relative of King Henry IV of France. An unwavering Calvinist and a staunch believer in the German liberties (the rights of princes to a certain level of territorial sovereignty that could not be curtailed by the emperor or any other party), Amalia Elisabeth defied the many attempts of both friends and enemies to broker a peace that would not only end the war but which would also have greatly reduced the inheritance of her son. Her chief aims were the restoration of Hesse-Cassel as it had been before the downfall of her late husband, the incorporation of Hesse-Marburg into her son's territory (which was vehemently contested by the rival branch of Hesse-Darmstadt), and the official recognition and protection through law of Calvinism in Germany, a postulate that had not been included in the Peace of Augsburg (1555) and the Peace of Prague (1635). Uncompromising in the pursuit of her aims, Amalia Elisabeth more than once refused to ratify peace contracts that would have damaged her son's inheritance and the Calvinist cause, and her contemporaries either praised or reviled the landgravine for her unbending determination. In the end this strategy paid off as most of Amalia Elisabeth's demands were granted by the Peace of Westphalia of 1648.

The cornerstone of her success was her army, and Helfferich is certainly right when she calls the landgravine a 'unique creature – a female condottiere' (p. 42). Landgrave Wilhelm V had begun to build an army of mercenaries paid for by occupied territories, such as East Frisia, and by Swedish and French subsidies, which had turned Hesse-Cassel into one of the most powerful anti-imperial parties of the final years of the war. As regent for her minor son, Amalia Elisabeth cleverly managed her late husband's military apparatus and successfully maintained the alliances with the two foreign crowns, which more than once relied on Hessian soldiers in their German campaigns. Thus Wilhelm V and Amalia Elisabeth's army appears as a precursor of the armies of mercenaries rented to Great Britain and other foreign powers from

1677 to 1815, including the feared and much reviled “Hessians” who fought for the British crown in the American War of Independence (on which Holger Th. Gräf et al. recently published *Die „Hessians“ im Amerikanischen Unabhängigkeitskrieg 1776–1783*).

The extent of Helfferich’s archival research is truly impressive. Among the most important sources are Amalia Elisabeth’s papers and the Hesse-Cassel records at the Staatsarchiv Marburg, as well as the records of her allies and opponents at Stockholm, Paris, Vienna and Darmstadt, to name just a few. Hence it is all the more a pity that there is no comprehensive bibliography or list of sources at the end of the book, which makes finding specific references in the notes a rather time-consuming business.

One of the few drawbacks of this otherwise remarkable book is that Helfferich obviously overstates the obscurity enshrouding the figure of Amalia Elisabeth. At least in Germany a number of historians have researched and written on various aspects of the landgravine’s biography and her part in Hesse-Cassel’s political, theological and military history: Gerhard Petri (*Das Militärwesen von Hessen-Kassel in der Zeit Landgraf Wilhelms V. und der Landgräfin Amalie Elisabeth 1627–1649*. 1996), Pauline Puppel (*Die Regentin: Vormundschaftliche Herrschaft in Hessen 1400–1700*. 2004), Simone Buckreus (*Der Körper einer Regentin: Amelia Elisabeth von Hessen-Kassel*. 2008), and Kerstin Weiland (*Hessen-Kassel und die Reichsverfassung: Ziele und Prioritäten landgräflicher Politik im Dreißigjährigen Krieg*. 2009). With regard to place names and topographical data it might also have been helpful to consult the Hessian Historical Gazetteer, an online resource provided by the Hessian State Office of Regional History (<http://lagis.online.uni-marburg.de/en/>).

Helfferich is not primarily interested in questions of gender and the female body of the landgravine, but in her military and political acumen, and thus it comes as no surprise that her personal life hardly ever takes centre stage in *The Iron Princess*. Well-researched and immensely readable, this account of Amalia Elisabeth’s eventful life and her courageous and often far-sighted diplomatic manoeuvres closes a gap in the history of the Thirty Years War as well as in the history of female regents of the seventeenth century.

MARTIN SPIES

Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen