German Miners Abroad: Elias Hessen, *Journey to East India* (1680)

Abstract

Elias Hessen, a German miner, provided an account of his journey with the Dutch East India Company to Sumatra. In his book, entitled *Ost-Indische Reise-Beschreibung* [*Journey to East India*], Hessen describes how he and several other German miners with varying levels of expertise traveled to Amsterdam to join the East India Company and enlist in mining work.

Source

Journey to East India
Part One.

Departure from Saxony to Holland. The City of Amsterdam, Short Description / and the Great Power of the East India Company.

[…]

[1680. Sept.] […]

The East India [Company] has risen to such grandeur and power that it is like a republic itself and has already brought under its control more miles than all the rods [5.029 meters per rod] of land encompassed by Holland. It is certain that, just as the King of Spain possesses most of the West Indies and also claims [to own] the rest, Holland's East India Company, among all the other European nations, has most of East India in its power, and every year takes control of many Oriental empires. We have a very new example in the Sunda Strait off the main island of Java, whose royal capital, they, the Dutch, under instructions to do so, captured by storm, and [they] vigorously pursued the old king from my time, who finally surrendered to the Company after being assured that his life would be spared; more will be said about this below. Said Company has at its disposal, in addition to a large number of ships (as displayed), more than 15,000 soldiers, and it is believed that they ordinarily keep more than 80,000 men on their payroll. We here, and I as recorder for the mining court [*Berg-Schreiber*], were included in its service, took the oath of loyalty to the directors on September 4 at the East India House, were registered by the accounting clerk, and as was usual, were handed our wages in advance every three months. During our stay here I had to see with great astonishment and pity how those who otherwise could not gain their fare were forced to join the East India Company as soldiers and sailors; most of them had to do so because of poverty under the guidance of the so-called sellers of souls here. […] The women here understand this business community very well, as I learned from my own experience. At the request of the mining director, the company directors decided to hire several Germans from Central Germany to work the mine they had in East India; the soldiers who were single or out of service, and other persons whose thoughts turned to India, were more than a little interested in such employment. Most of them were, with said women, eager to join the East India Company, where they for that purpose offered their services to the Company directors. However, the Company directors referred all of them to the mining director, and on his order, I made a list of such voluntary travelers to East India, and afterwards gave it to the Company directors. Here I can say that, in truth, there were often so many people standing on the street in front of our House, most of them Germans (for our directors did not want Dutchmen), that great effort was required to get through. However, as we did not need more than thirty people, it was not possible to satisfy the wish of all of them to be officially employed by us. From this it is sufficiently evident that in Amsterdam there is a great crowd of

people vigorously rushing to go to East India.

Aside from this, I spent my time during our sojourn in the East India trade center, where our head man had a smelter built because the directors demanded to see a sample from our smelters. However, I cannot report with any certainty about what happened after that, or where the three smelters brought with us from Saxony ended up after our departure. With that, enough about Amsterdam; I will continue, and now I also want to tell the fortunate reader about my trip from here on to East India. […]

Source: Elias Hessen, *Ost-Indische Reise-Beschreibung Oder Diarium, Was bey der Reise des Churfürstl. Sächs. Raths und Bergk-Commissarii D. Benjamin Olitschens/ im Jahr 1680. Von Dreßden aus biß in Asiam auff die Insul Sumatra Denckwürdiges vorgegangen*, 1690, pp. 1, 9–12. Available online at: http://digitale.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/vd17/content/pageview/875929

Translation: Kathleen Dell'Orto

Recommended Citation: German Miners Abroad: Elias Hessen, Journey to East India (1680), published in: German History Intersections, <https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-281> [September 16, 2026].