

Francisca Hoyer, *Relations of Absence: Germans in the East Indies and Their Families, c. 1750–1820* (Uppsala: Acta Historica Upsaliensia, 2020). 370 pp.

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Francisca Hoyer's thesis is a welcome addition to our understanding of early global processes on a micro level. Basing her investigation on twenty-seven archives and a vast secondary literature, she successfully analyses the familial relations of a category of world travelers who are not unknown to previous historiography but have frequently been overlooked. These are the hundreds of thousands of Germans who signed up with the leading East Indies trading companies, the Dutch VOC and the English EIC, in the early modern era. Many of them came to an early death in the plantations of Sumatra, the malaria-infested quarters of Batavia, or the cramped company ships which took more than half-a-year to reach their Asian destinations. Those who survived maintained connections to their Central European backgrounds and forged new connections in their new environment. Unmarried sailors, soldiers, artisans, and other company employees would find wives and mistresses, mostly but not exclusively Asian and Eurasian women, and consequently sire children whose status was largely contingent on skin colour. They might also go to great length to maintain contacts with their distant kin in Brandenburg, Saxony or Mecklenburg, though the exchange of letters demanded years of patient waiting.

Conversely, the families back in Germany were often anxious for news about relatives who had become *Ostindienfahrer*, not least when there were issues of inheritance at stake. It is in this context that Hoyer analyses the nexus of family and empire, a history that is both social and global. Several German historians

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of the past have argued that the historical trajectory of Germany is characterized by its lack of overseas expansion, apart from a brief era in 1885–1918. Hoyer's investigation points in the opposite direction. While the Holy Roman Empire and Prussia might not have been directly involved with the Dutch and British overseas projects in political-diplomatic terms, these lands were in fact profoundly affected by expansion as hundreds of thousands of Germans experienced globalization, which in turn left imprints on metropolitan society, the “multiplier effects of empire”. The argument is that recently developed micro-historical and biographical methods can deepen our understanding and reveal global currents that have otherwise been obscured by macro-historical approaches.

For practical purposes Hoyer's study is limited to the period 1750–1820 and the VOC and EIC settlements along the coasts of the Indian Ocean. She has studied 180 families that included members who were *Ostindienfahrer*. The abundant and relatively well-preserved VOC and EIC materials have been complemented by extensive research in various German archives, where letters and wills reveal a fascinating web of relationships. It should be noted that Hoyer's arguments are not based on travel accounts, which have often been at the center of previous studies. In fact, her study is somewhat distanced from much current postcolonial research since we learn relatively little about the German migrants' impressions of the Asian lands, and the cultural significance of such images. Reading her text, one wonders how much description of overseas societies the letters of the *Ostindienfahrer* actually contained, and how they related to stereotypes that were circulating, for example, via popular travel accounts (mentioned parenthetically in the book, but no more than so). Such questions are secondary to Hoyer's investigation. It is perhaps significant that a classic such as Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* is not in the list of references, nor are postcolonial stock items by Bhabha, Said or Spivak. The picture of the migrants' experiences rather grows out of the social facts gleaned from the letters and documents. A historical convention often found in the historiography of the VOC is that people who signed up with the Company were the dregs of European society, with little to lose by making the dangerous journey to the East Indies. As shown by a study of the 180 families in Hoyer's sample, this is simply not true; rather, they belonged to a variety of occupational groups and social backgrounds.

The investigation is divided into five main chapters, devoted to various aspects of migrating and remaining. The structure of the text reminds us that this is a PhD thesis rather than a book for a broader academic readership. The analytic discussion is thorough but tends towards the verbose, and the contents of some of the chapters are rather similar. Chapters 3, 4 and 6 contain discussions of the family members who stayed behind, and many cases tend to recur over the pages.

All this being said, the agency displayed by the involved families is often highly captivating. One cannot but admire the persistent efforts of people to maintain contact with relatives in a world where letters took close to a year to reach the addressee. Also interesting is the role of real or imagined inheritances that successful *Ostindienfahrer* supposedly left behind after their demise. A study of preserved petitions shows that ideas of the East Indies were often loaded with wild expectations and that there was a fluid line between truth and imagination; rumours of company employees who had gained tons of gold abounded, engendering vain hopes among their kin in Germany. The prospect of receiving a fortune through a long-lost brother or kinsman was of course compelling. The study also gives interesting information about how inheritance cases were handled administratively in the Netherlands and Germany, putting the workings of early globalization into relief.

For the student of overseas expansion, the most interesting parts are presumably those dealing with the migrants themselves, their efforts to settle socially in the Indian Ocean World and the new family constellations that occurred. Here Hoyer can build further on a considerable historiography, where especially Dutch historians have mapped the social world of the colonial contact zones. However, family life of the VOC and EIC spheres have usually been studied apart from each other, and Hoyer makes efforts to bridge the two historiographies and find distinctions and commonalities. The companies tried to regulate inter-ethnic matrimonial relationships, which were unavoidable considering the near lack of European-born women in the Asian possessions. But there was also a tradition of temporary marriage in parts of Asia which in fact enabled German migrants to take concubines. The situation was also complicated (or facilitated, depending on perspective) by the large numbers of slaves, who were nearly as plentiful as in the Atlantic world. An unfree maiden would often be used for sexual services, and the documents display interesting hints of personal affection on the part of the German master. Male and female slaves were sometimes favoured in wills, emancipated and even appointed successors in their deceased master's trade. Other documents, however, indicate that newly arrived Germans were unused to the institution of slavery and treated their slaves unduly harshly. The German experience with the East Indies becomes a useful reminder of the multifaceted nature of colonial contact zones. Even so, the information would have been served by a somewhat broader contextualization of the Asian milieu that the migrants encountered, although such addition would have increased an already quite bulky book.

Another issue that could probably have been expanded is the social consequences of the rather high percentage of Germans in the eighteenth-century ranks of the VOC. From my own research surveying the military rolls of eastern

Indonesian posts, such as Kupang on Timor, it is apparent that a very significant majority of the soldiers are expressly Germans. In other words, most Europeans in such localities would have spoken German dialects with each other, while their Dutch superiors were in a minority. At a place like Timor we also find that soldiers in the eighteenth century were assertive vis-à-vis the VOC administrators. Hoyer is specifically not trying to pinpoint the formation of a German national identity, but there was apparently a group dynamic based on commonality in language, which presumably influenced family formation. The question of how social networking derived from the very fact that most Europeans in some places were simply Germans would no doubt be interesting to pursue.

To sum up, the thesis has methodological and theoretical strengths which by far outweigh the drawbacks. It employs a stimulating triangulation of data from a multitude of archives. It shows how hard and systematic work in the archives can yield fascinating data on the micro level that outlines the contours of human lives in a process of migration. The global theoretical perspective is just as fascinating. It ties in with a research trend to see empire and overseas expansion as transcending political borders. The idea that Germany is part of an expansion project rather than isolated from overseas expansion is fruitful and might similarly be applied to other Western countries with a traditionally low profile in overseas projects, to an extent including Sweden.