



Volume 2. From Absolutism to Napoleon, 1648-1815
Johann Gottfried Seume, "In Hessian Lands" (1813)

The Saxon-born writer and traveler Johann Gottfried Seume (1763-1810) was forcibly pressed into Hessian service in the 1780s. As a result, he was sold to Britain for duty in Canada. After a number of escape attempts, he was eventually bought free. Here, he recounts the fear and brutality he suffered; he also describes the cynicism that pervaded the mercenary system.

In Hessian Lands

They brought me as a half-prisoner to fortress Ziegenhain, where there were already many comrades-in-misery from everywhere, scheduled to go to America the following spring, after Fawcet's inspection. I yielded to my fate and sought to make the best of it, as bad as it was. We were held in Ziegenhain for a long time, before the sufficient number of recruits had been brought together from the plow, the highways, and the recruitment cities. The story and period is known well enough: back then nobody was safe from the helpers of the kidnappers; persuasion, guile, fraud, violence, everything went. Nobody asked about the means to the damnable end. Strangers of every kind were stopped, seized, sent away. They tore up my matriculation, the sole document of my legitimation. In the end, I ceased to be angry; you have to live everywhere; where so many make it through, you will, too; swimming across the ocean was inviting enough for a young chap, and there were things to see on the other side as well. That's what I was thinking. During our stay in Ziegenhain, old General Gore needed me for writing and treated me with much friendliness. Here, then, a true hodgepodge of human souls had been heaped together: good and bad, and others who were alternately both. My comrades were a wayward student from Jena, a bankrupt merchant from Vienna, a lace maker from Hannover, a dismissed postal clerk, a monk from Würzburg, an upper bailiff from Meinungen, a Prussian hussar sergeant, a cashiered Hessian major from the fortress, and others of similar ilk. One can imagine that there was no lack of entertainment; and merely a sketch of the life of the gentlemen would make for entertaining, instructive reading. Since most had experienced what I had, or even worse, a grand plot for all our liberation was soon spun. There was so much good confidence in my understanding and courage that the leadership and command was handed over to me with unlimited powers; and I took counsel with myself and was not disinclined to assume the honorable post, to lead fifteen hundred men to freedom and then discharge them honorably, each on his way. In addition to the splendid charge, it was marvelously enticing to play a trick on the gentleman Landgrave for his kidnapping, one he would remember because it would cost so damn much. When I was fairly resolved, an old Prussian sergeant came to me in

confidence: “Young man,” he said to me, “You will be hurrying inevitably to your doom if you take on this charge. Rarely does such an undertaking come off happily; too numerous are the coincidences that will cause it to fail. Believe this old man; I have unfortunately been present at several such occasions. You seem good and honest, and I love you like a father. Let my advice count for something! If the matter comes off successfully, we will not be the last to derive an advantage from it.” I pondered what the old soldier had told me, suppressed my small ambition, excused myself on account of my youth and inexperience, and let the matter take its course. The first sergeant in the artillery was right; everything was betrayed: a tailor from Göttingen, with a voice like a nightingale, bought himself with this perfidy a post as a non-commissioned officer and, since they very much appreciated him and his life was in danger, his freedom and a handful of ducats. I still remember the whole thing quite vividly. All preparations for the breakout had been made. We were housed in various quarters, in the barracks, the castle, and an old knights’ hall. The plan was to set out at midnight upon a signal, storm the guard and take away the guns, stab down whoever resisted, break into the armory, clay the canons, bolt the commandant’s house, and march out of the gate. In three hours we would have been free; there were plenty of folks who knew the way. But when we came to the square the day before by companies, we found, instead of the usual twenty men, more than a hundred, canons on the wings with cannoniers with lit fuses, and case-shots lying in the distance. Everyone knew what was in store for us. The general came and held a true gallows speech: “There are more canons by the gate,” he called out, “don’t you want to go?” The adjutants came and read out those to be arrested: Hans, Peter, Michel, Görge, Kunz. My name was one of the first, for it seemed very unlikely to the gentlemen that the wayward student was not part of it. But since no one could put anything on me, I was soon let go, presumably even more so because of the large number. The trial commenced; two were sentenced to the gallows, among whom I would have unfailingly been, had the old Prussian sergeant not saved me. Large numbers of the others had to run the gantlet, from thirty-six times down to twelve times. It was a brutal butchery. Although the candidates for the gallows were pardoned after suffering mortal fear beneath the gibbet, they had to run the gantlet thirty-six times and were brought, upon the prince’s pardon, to Kassel in irons. At that time, in irons for an undetermined time and upon pardon meant as much as, *forever and without redemption*. At any rate, the prince’s pardon was a case nobody had ever heard of. More than thirty were cruelly disciplined in this way, and many, myself among them, came through only because too large a number of accessories would have had to be punished. A few were released again when we marched out, for reasons that are easy to guess; for a bloke who goes to Kassel in chains is not paid for by the English.

Source: Johann Gottfried Seume, “Im Hessischen” [“In Hessian Lands”], from *Mein Leben* [My Life] (1813), in *Prosaschriften* [Prose Writings], edited by W. Kraft. Cologne: J. Metzler, 1974, pp. 112-16.

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