

The Pirate Revolution

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The Age of Revolution is often falsely characterized as beginning with the Industrial Revolution or the American Revolution.¹ This definition marks the start of the Age of Revolution with a successful rebellion and economic changes beginning in the 1760s, which is incorrect. 50 years earlier, beginning in 1713, a band of four thousand pirates fought the first revolution of the Age of Revolution.² These men fought a social revolution, not one to remove the control of a monarch, but to change maritime life. This paper argues that the pirates of the Atlantic from 1713 to 1726 fought the first revolution of the Age of Revolution.³ While these maritime bandits did not succeed in their endeavours, they did promote ideas that would become the basis for revolutions in the coming decades. This paper will look at the conditions that triggered social revolution and the social changes that pirates attempted to enable.

When discussing the pirate revolution, the two most important factors that contributed to these men to pursue the pirate life were the end of the War of Spanish Succession and the Draconian system that directed life on board naval and merchant ships at that time. The twelve year war between the Spanish and the English ending in 1713 left a minimum estimate of 36,000 sailors unemployed in the first 24 months after the signing of the Peace of Utrecht.⁴ Some of these mariners sailed as members of the Royal Navy, but most had been previously employed as privateers who preyed on Spanish merchant ships. As peace arrived, the need for privateers had

¹ "Revolution, Age Of." "Age of Revolution." Encyclopedia of the New American Nation. 2018. Accessed November 06, 2018.

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/revolution-age>.

² Angus Konstam, *Blackbeard: America's Most Notorious Pirate* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2007), 105.

³ Marcus Rediker, *Villains of all Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Beacon Press: Boston, 2004), 8. The date of the end of the pirate revolution could be interpreted to be different. 1726 is my chosen date because it coincides with the death of William Fly and the end of what is known as the Golden Age of Pirates according to Rediker.

⁴ Colin Woodard, *The Republic of Pirates: Being the True and Surprising Story of the Caribbean Pirates and the Man Who Brought Them down*. (Boston: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015), 86.

ceased. Captain Charles Johnson, the first pirate historian, observes that these former privateers in peace time “too readily engaged in acts of piracy, which being the same profession without commission, they make very little distinction between the lawfulness of one, and the unlawfulness of the other.”⁵ Captain Johnson explains that these men most willingly ignored the rules of society. In less than six months, men including Benjamin Hornigold, Edward “Blackbeard” Teach, “Black” Sam Bellamy, and Charles Vane, decided to go on the account and return to a life with great risk and great reward.⁶ Why?

One Port Royal resident recalled that

“Resentment and want of employ were certainly the motives of course of life which I am of opinion that most or many of them would not have taken up had they been redressed or could by any lawful mean have supported themselves.”⁷

The end of the War of Spanish Succession created the want of employ. Many of these men had only know privateering. This was the life they knew and the only way they knew how to making a living. The resentment, mentioned above, did not develop because of an enemy or the war with Spain, but rather because of their fellow countrymen.

Two other major classes of pirates were former sailors from merchant ships and slaves. Both of these groups had developed a resentment for being part of society that only brought them suffering. Both turned to piracy as a method to escape the horrors they endured and live a life of equality and freedom. One gruesome case, but not uncommon according to pirate historian Angus Konstam, saw John Phillips aboard the *Laventon Galley* have his face smashed in by the

⁵ Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Robberies & Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*, (Guilford London: Printed for Ch. Rivington, J. Lacy, and J. Stone, 1724; CT: Lyons Press, 2010), 38.

⁶ Woodard, *The Republic*, 87. “Going on the account” was the pirates’ official term for joining the pirate’s life.

⁷ Woodard, *The Republic*, 87.

merchant Captain Hawkins and then being forced to set the topgallant where he bled to death, while the captain threatened to shoot anyone who tried to help him.⁸ People often accuse pirates of being torturous villains that would whip, dismember and keelhaul their victims, but often they learned their methods from authority figures before them. Beyond the rough authority figures, merchant sailors also made low wages, had to endure long perilous journeys with little time and money for luxuries. These sailors turned to piracy because they wanted change and liberty that had been denied by the cruel merchant captains, many who got away with murder.⁹

In a career fraught with danger and death, pirates had little time or reason to concern themselves with racism or political discourse with other nationalities. Though most recorded pirates came from english speaking lands, there were pirates from France, Spain, Netherlands, and a variety of other countries and territories along the Atlantic.¹⁰ Even more, pirates would often recruit slaves from captured ships who would trade their captivity for a life of piracy. Here they received an equal share of each prize, they received the same liberties and compensations as other pirates, but should they have been captured they would be returned to the auction block by their captors rather than swing from the gallows.¹¹ When Blackbeard's crew was brought to trial in March of 1719, of the five African Americans, four were given "mercy" by the Admiralty Court for their unqualified testimonies and returned to the slave market rather than be executed. Only Black Caesar, who attempted to blow up Blackbeard's vessel the *Adventure*, hung with the other members of Blackbeard's crew.¹² The "civilized" British government would not use the

⁸ Konstam, *Blackbeard*, 50.

⁹ Cotton Mather, *The Tryals of Sixteen Persons for Piracy*, (Boston, 1726), 14-15.

¹⁰ Konstam, *Blackbeard*, 48.

¹¹ Konstam, *Blackbeard*, 49.

¹² Konstam, *Blackbeard*, 268.

testimonies of these men because they were black and merciful returned them to slavery. Both mistreated mariners and slaves found freedom, independence and equality in the pirate life and willingly signed the articles.

These men, frustrated with life in civilized world, in a criminal movement pushed for change. The changes that many pirates wished to make in the social workings of their vessels included establishing equality for all who sailed under the black, a clear and fair justice system, and an opportunity to out any authority figure who did wrong by the crew.¹³ To ensure that these changes were thoroughly detailed so that all could understand and follow them, pirates wrote out and signed ship constitutions, known as articles, that would be nailed to a central location like the captain's cabin door so that they would be visible to all. The articles described the rules of the ship and the manners by which the crew should act and what punishment would be enacted upon any infractions. They often included a description of how crew members were to act towards one another when on the account, how crimes would be investigated and what punishment would be delivered upon a guilty verdict, and a description of how one is to act in battle. The articles on board the *Revenge*, captained by John Phillips, included the following:

2. If any Man shall offer to run away, or keep any Secret from the Company, he shall be marooned, with one Bottle of Powder, and Bottle of Water, one small Arm, and Shot.
5. That Man that shall strike another whilst the Articles are in force, shall receive Moses's Law (that is, 40 Stripes lacking one) on the bare Back.¹⁴

Articles examples such as these present evidence of the pirates to change the social order at sea.

The pirate captains no longer had full discretion at sea and couldn't levee unreasonable

¹³ Johnson, *A General History*, 291.

¹⁴ Johnson, *A General History*, 291.

punishment as the merchant captains had. These men moved the power of the judiciary from the “head of state” to the people. They were not subject to the interpretations of a single judge or Admiralty Court, who often favored the prosecution, but rather jury of their peers. This would be seen in results of a future revolution, the American Revolution, where the judiciary members would be selected by a popularly voted president and confirmed by popularly voted senators, and the power was put in the hands of the collective rather than an entitled few.

Though no two articles were the same, they shared common themes of equality and honesty, and this allowed pirates to establish democratic governments aboard their vessels. Each man had an equal vote in deciding the destination of the ship, in criminal matters, and in officer elections.¹⁵ If a man was not pleased with the current articles, he had the free will to leave. Pirates rejected the idea of enduring years of mandatory service in the Royal Navy or working for a merchant company that did not have their best interests in mind. The crew as a whole remained as the greatest power on a pirate ship. Popular sovereignty became a common theme among pirate ships to ensure that they worked for themselves and not an overbearing captain. Should the captain no longer satisfy the crew, be it by income or attitude, the crew had the power to vote out the captain and replace him with one of their own. This forced the captains to keep the crews best interest in mind or risk losing their jobs and possibly being marooned.¹⁶ In so doing, pirates established a democratic way of life where the law could not be manipulated or misinterpreted to work against them. The American Revolution further developed on this threat of ousting leaders by establishing terms on presidents and congressional members.

¹⁵ David Cordingly, *Under the Black Flag: The Romance and the Reality of Life among the Pirates*, (New York: Random House, 2006), 96.

¹⁶ Cordingly, *Under the Black*, 98.

The pirates scourge from 1713-1726 brought about the first revolution of the Age of Revolution. While these men did not serve a cause beyond their own self interest and liberties, these men under the black attempted to create social changes to resist oppression and mistreatment by the legal world. An interesting note is that thousands of pirates would accept the King's Pardon of 1718, including Blackbeard and Stede "The Gentleman Pirate" Bonnet, suggesting these men did not wish to separate from the European empires, but instead wanted to have a life of no oppression and employment while being part of the civilized world.¹⁷ The pirates fought for similar social changes to those of the American Revolution, 60 years earlier, but they fought for those changes within the British Empire, not as a separate nation.

¹⁷ Woodard, *The Republic*, 226-236.

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