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Terror: The Ultimate Weapon of Pirates

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HIST 380: Pirates, Captives, and Slavery

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Southern Adventist University

*“One can refuse to call such people [pirates] an army, if one wishes; yet they are organized as an army, and certainly they conduct themselves as an army, giving and taking secret orders to attack their enemies with a variety of tactics that serve one overarching strategy: terror.”<sup>1</sup>*

The illusion of pirates as created by *Pirates of the Caribbean*, the fantastical book *Treasure Island*, and even Peter Pan’s own Captain Hook, has severely distorted the image of the sea-fairing rovers. Conjuring up an identity of fun, cutlass-carrying, eye-patch-wearing men and women, those who know little of the truth of pirates do not realize their horrific additions to the history of the world. However, there are still pirates sailing the oceans today. In the words of Angus Konstam, “A pirate is a robber who performs his crimes at sea, and this applies as much to a Filipino pirate wielding an AK-47 as it does to Blackbeard with his flintlock pistols. Although tactics and methods have changed, the crimes are the same.”<sup>2</sup> Coincidentally, few see this similarity and keep 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century pirates in a category of their own. To better understand the comparison of “older” pirates to those of today, another characteristic of these barbaric sailors needs to be understood: acts of terror, terrorism.

Pirates during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, their golden age, were a fearsome group to be reckoned with. Just to spy a ship sailing under the Jolly Roger, or any flag representative of pirates, caused panic among other vessels. Notable pirate captains had their own personal flags made and if seen, was enough to make a merchant ship surrender without violence. If the flag itself did not cause surrender, the pirates themselves did. Horror stories of the viciousness of pirates spread throughout the world. People had their tongues cut off, were made to eat human

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<sup>1</sup> Carr, Caleb, *The Lessons of Terror: a History of Warfare against Civilians*. (New York: Random House, 2003), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Konstam, Angus, *The History of Pirates*. (The Lyons Press, 1999), 8.

flesh, or in a specific case, dance in a circle while being stabbed by the crew. Whatever landlubbers and other sailors had heard, it was probably true, and no one wanted to be subjected to such terrorism. The lifestyle and outward appearance of pirates created a sense of dread for any sea-faring man (or woman) who happened to come in contact with the bootleggers. The deep understanding of terror that pirates used on their victims allowed them to be potent in their craft.

Among one of the most fearsome acts that people think of when the word “terrorism” is mentioned are the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. After that event, Americans tried to find other occurrences to compare the incident to, and finally, experts turned to the Barbary pirates. The Islamic terrorists involved in the September 11 tragedy were just like the pirates of the Mediterranean, the only difference was in the name.<sup>3</sup> The use of terror, for pirates, was the foundation of their success. Because, however, terrorism has different faces, there is often a disconnect of how pirates used terror. To understand the use, one has to understand terror itself. First and foremost, pirates often did not wish to fight, but would rather intimidate their prey through psychological terror instead of physical, as it is usually thought of today. Emphasizing this point, historian Marcus Rediker writes, “Pirates used terror for several reasons: to avoid fighting; to force disclosure of information about where booty was hidden; and to punish ship captains.”<sup>4</sup> Rediker clearly states the first point of terror being the avoidance of bloodshed. The other two, however, reveal the more modern idea of terror which is violence. It would be ignorant to say pirates only used psychological terror, but it was a very large part of their success, especially in the use of their flags, namely the Jolly Roger.

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<sup>3</sup> Silverstein, Paul A. “The New Barbarians: Piracy and Terrorism on the North African Frontier.” *The New Centennial Review* 5, no. 1 (2005): 179-212.

<sup>4</sup> Rediker, Marcus, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age*. (London: Verso, 2012), 14.

For contemporaries, the lure of piracy is odd. Why would anyone subject themselves to a life on the sea, practically jailed upon a boat for weeks and months on end? The appeal was in the, “allure of quick wealth,” which, “outweighed even the risk of dying on the gallows.”<sup>5</sup> The “risks” referred to are what was done to pirates if they were caught. The price of sailing under the black flag was usually death. Pirates hardly seemed to care about the high price, however. Creating terror for others made them, in turn, unafraid of the terror they faced. The freebooter L’Olonnais once said to a captive that he would rather end his own life than be captured by the Spanish, revealing just how little the threat of death meant to him, and equally meant to others of his trade.<sup>6</sup> Terrorists created the fear, and were not afraid of it themselves, which practically made them unstoppable.

Terror is so effective because it quite literally stops economic and social improvement. To illustrate this is the fact that when piracy reached a high in 1720, the trade between Europe and the Americas was deeply threatened.<sup>7</sup> Pirates preyed on the ships of merchants and traders, marauding for goods like silver and sellable items. Plundering was their craft and terror helped them accomplish that. “Piracy was predicated on terror, as all contemporaries of freebooting well understood.”<sup>8</sup> Without the act of terrorism, piracy did not, and cannot exist. The definition of a pirate and his success was linked to the amount of terror he generated for his victims. The accomplishment of this was due to, as stated earlier, the psychological use of flags as terror, and

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<sup>5</sup> Butler, Lindley S. “North Carolina 1718: The Year of the Pirates.” *North Carolina Historical Review* XCV, no. 2 (Apr. 2018): 125-146.

<sup>6</sup> Exquemelin, A.O., and Terry Breverton., *The Illustrated Pirate Diaries: a Remarkable Eyewitness Account of Captain Morgan and the Buccaneers*. (Sydney, N. S. W.: New Holland, 2008) 73.

<sup>7</sup> Cordingly, David, *Under the Black Flag: the Romance and the Reality of Life among the Pirates*. (Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006) XVII. In *Villains of all Nations*, Rediker also claims that there was zero growth in English shipping during this time.

<sup>8</sup> Rediker, Marcus, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age*.13.

physical terrorism. The atrocities committed by pirates usually only happened if the terrifying symbols of the flags hung from their ships, did not work.

English, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese flags were among the many that could be spotted being flown from ships during the Golden Age of Piracy. Merchant and naval ships sailed across the oceans in relative peace, but if a black flag appeared, fear was struck within the hearts of sailors. Though not every pirate flag was black, and had the same symbols, there was one commonality: “their need to strike terror in the minds of the merchant seaman who were their victims.”<sup>9</sup> Terror did not have to be direct, but merely the glimpse of a Jolly Roger could accomplish the purpose of the pirates. The sea-marauders had been around long enough to create a name for themselves around the world. No ship with sane men would ever desire to meet with a pirate sloop. If a ship flying a black flag with skull and crossbones was spotted, everyone knew exactly what it meant, even if they had never before encountered a pirate. By sailing under the notorious flag, “they announced themselves as ‘the Villains of all Nations.’”<sup>10</sup> The pirates were not approaching other ships to make friends, their work was embossed in terror and taking whatever, they could at whatever cost they had to.

Due to the want for as many plundered goods as possible, pirates, if they could help it, simply relied on, not just the “black flag” but those of other nations as well. If an English ship was being approached by another galley flying Dutch colors, the English would be less suspicious of the motives of the Dutch, and have a peaceful exchange. Pirates, of course, knew this; most had been a merchant sailor or mate on a naval ship before turning to piracy for a living. The tactic not only worked on other sailing vessels, but on islands as well. A pirate Captain Davis, upon nearing an island, hoisted English colors and was welcomed by the

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<sup>9</sup> Cordingly, David, *Under the Black Flag: the Romance and the Reality of Life among the Pirates*. 116.

<sup>10</sup> Rediker, Marcus, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age*. 164.

governor, who did not suspect a thing.<sup>11</sup> Acquiring a flag of a different country was no issue for pirates, all they did was steal other people's property. The ease of deception involved in flying false flags made the job of pirates all the easier. Avoiding a nasty skirmish or having to chase after another ship was the absolute ideal. The term for such trickery is "*ruse de guerre*", quite literally meaning "ruse of war" which privateers, naval ship, and pirates knew alike.<sup>12</sup> The ability to "catch" their prey without chase is ideal for any predator, but especially useful for pirates. They understood that creating an image for themselves as fierce, would then tie to any other symbol used to represent them. "Pirates deliberately built-up a reputation for cruelty and violence. They used flags to frighten passing ships, hoping that they would surrender without too much of a fight."<sup>13</sup> Pirates were indeed brilliant when it came to terrorizing civilians and sailors, and by building a formidable name for themselves, their use of pirate flags as a terror tactic became widely successful.

To understand the fearsome image of the flag, one has to understand the symbols. There were many different variations of the same flag, each pirate emphasizing whatever figure they wanted to use to terrify other ships with.

The skull, the crossbones, the skeleton, the hourglass, the dart, and even the color black suggested, in the Christian world-view, mortality, the transitoriness of life, and the swift passage of time. The skeleton, which was apparently assimilated from pagan into Christian iconography, represented the all-sovereign "King of Death," the "Grim

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<sup>11</sup> Johnson, Charles, and David Cordingly, *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*. (The Lyons Press, 2010) 142.

<sup>12</sup> Hasty, William. 2014. "Metamorphosis Afloat: Pirate Ships, Politics and Metamorphosis." c. 1680-1730. *Mobilities* 9, no. 3: 349-67.

<sup>13</sup> Lincoln, Margarete, *The Pirates Handbook*. (New York: Cobblehill Books, 1995) 18.

Reaper,” or “Father Time,” who was depicted with a sword (or more commonly a scythe) and an hourglass.<sup>14</sup>

For the majority of pirates, symbols as such simply meant they were, in fact, a sea-rover, but for the most gruesome pirates, there were recognizable flag linked to the captain. Notable pirate captains such as Calico Jack, Stede Bonnet, and Edward Low were among the infamous few who had specific flags. Perhaps the most famous flags, however, belonged to Bartholomew Roberts, or also known as Black Bart. Unlike any other pirate, he had two different flags. One, pictured behind him in fig. 1.1, below, was his “common” flag.<sup>15</sup> Not visible in the figure, the other half of the flag is a man representing Roberts, holding an hourglass with the skeleton (death), visible in the print.<sup>16</sup> Sailors knew the flag, and knew if it was being flown, the notorious Black Bart would be close to follow. His second flag holds quite the petty story. “Roberts was so angry with the governors of Martinique and Barbados for continually trying to capture him, that he created a special flag to make them fear for their lives. The flag showed a figure of himself standing on two skulls. Under them were the letters ABH and AMH, meaning A Barbadian’s Head and A Martinican’s Head.”<sup>17</sup> The amount of anger from Captain Bartholomew Roberts towards the two governors created in him a special kind of terrorism; specified terror, which in the use of flags, was commonly used. Pirate flags had the sole purpose of terrorizing the soon to be victims of the sea-attacks. Angus Konstam, in his book “The History of Pirates” comments on the fear flags struck with merchant sailors, but also notes that if the flag “offered a clue as to the identity of the pirate who flew it”, then the terror was not just in the flag, but in the reputation of

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<sup>14</sup> Rediker, Marcus, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age*.166

<sup>15</sup> *Captain Bartholomew Roberts*. , 1725. Photograph.

<sup>16</sup> Edwards, Chris. “Famous Pirate Flags And Their Meanings.” Vispronet, August 12, 2019. <https://www.vispronet.com/blog/famous-pirate-flags/>.

<sup>17</sup> Lincoln, Margarete, *The Pirates Handbook*. 19.

the pirate.<sup>18</sup> Pirates did use physical terrorization which spread by word of mouth quite quickly. If a flag was not enough to deter other sailors, pirates used other means to get exactly what they wanted.

Because of literature, movies, and even social media, pirates have become something of a trend, not a vicious symbol of tyranny. Pirates were, however, devils. Their whole lives were based off of plunder and violence. If they could not plunder easily, death ensued. When the terror



Fig. 1.1<sup>15</sup>

tactic of simply flying the Jolly Roger in hopes of an easy surrender from other ships did not occur, pirates wreaked havoc. The well-known, Henry Morgan had to learn the pirate-trade, just as any other man. He found that, "Pirates depend on their reputation for cruelty," and that said reputations were beneficial, even imperative

<sup>18</sup> Konstam, Angus, *The History of Pirates*. 100.

to the life and success of a pirate.<sup>19</sup> Without terrorism, the freebooters lost their credibility on the sea. Most pirates, often the notoriously, infamous ones, knew this best.

Every pirate, usually the captain was the one doling out the cruelty, had his own sick twist on torture of any captives. The harsher the reputation, the easier plundering was. Author Milton Meltzer write on how, “the reputation for brutality and terror that clung to pirates gave them special advantage. . .”<sup>20</sup> One such pirate with this kind of horrific status was L’Ollonais. After having a difficult run-in with the Spanish, L’Ollonais vowed to spare none of them and dealt, appallingly with his victims, Spanish or not. During one of his bloodbaths the Captain sliced a man’s chest open, pulled out his heart with his hands, and began to chew on it telling the rest of the captured crew he would do the same to each one of them if they did not give him what he wanted.<sup>21</sup> L’Ollonais held such a fearsome reputation of violence that Spaniards would not even fight to save their ships because they knew death was eminent. The psychotic captain, “was even reported to have cut a man to pieces with his sword and then licked the blade clean, suggest[ing] a level of pathology not found in the ordinary pirate.”<sup>22</sup> Dreadfully cruel, L’Ollonais understood the effectiveness of terror and played it out to the fullest extent. There was no line that could not be crossed. Chinese pirates had a reputation for nailing captives to the decks of their ships and a Captain Low cut off the lips of a prisoner captain and broiled them as the man watched.<sup>23</sup> He also forced one man to eat his own ears after he had ordered them to be cut off.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Talty, Stephan, *Empire of Blue Water: Captain Morgan’s Great Pirate Army, the Epic Battle for the Americas, and the Catastrophe That Ended the Outlaws Bloody Reign*. (New York: Crown Publishers, 2007) 93.

<sup>20</sup> Meltzer, Milton, *Piracy & Plunder: a Murderous Business*. (New York: Dutton Childrens Books, 2001) 42.

<sup>21</sup> Newark, Peter, *The Crimson Book of Pirates*. (London: Jupiter, 1978) 101.

<sup>22</sup> Talty, Stephan, *Empire of Blue Water: Captain Morgan’s Great Pirate Army, the Epic Battle for the Americas, and the Catastrophe That Ended the Outlaws Bloody Reign*. 95.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 152.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 153

The cruelty was endless, and stories of such repute traveled quickly, striking fear in any person who took to the sea while these marauders were out and about.

Using physical terror on prisoners and captives, for one man, simply was not enough. Edward Teach, also known as Blackbeard, was a pirate straight from hell. He terrorized his own crew. Even the way he dressed was part of his terror tactics. Fig. 1.2 is a print of Blackbeard, showing his garb and famous beard.<sup>25</sup> He carries six pistols and two cutlasses, already a fearsome thing to behold without all the stories he “comes” with. Two of those pistols were put to use one evening, to terrorize two of his own men. The story goes as this:



Fig. 1.2

The Pirate commander [Blackbeard] was once drinking in his cabin with the pilot and another man. Without any provocation he drew his pistols underneath the table, cocked them, blew out the candle, crossed his hands, and fired the guns. Blackbeard did not have any quarrel with either man, which naturally led one of them to ask him why he’d shot them. He only answered by damming them, that if he did not now and then kill one of them, they would forget who he was.<sup>26</sup>

Such was the cruelty of Blackbeard. The man was so unforgettable that Captain Johnson wrote, “Captain Teach assumed the cognomen Black-beard, from that large quantity of hair, which, like

<sup>25</sup> *Blackbeard the Pirate.* , 1725. Photograph.

<sup>26</sup> Talty, Stephan, *Empire of Blue Water: Captain Morgan’s Great Pirate Army, the Epic Battle for the Americas, and the Catastrophe That Ended the Outlaws Bloody Reign.* 94.

a frightful meteor, covered his whole face, and frightened America more than any comet that has appeared there a long time.”<sup>27</sup> The incredible part was how quickly stories like this spread.

Landlubbers and merchant sailors alike knew the atrocities of pirate captains like Blackbeard, Low, and L’Ollonais, mostly through word of mouth. Due to the ability to circumnavigate the world, “. . .rumor, reputation, and information circulated among sailors. . .”<sup>28</sup> This singlehandedly affected the capacity that pirates had in terrorizing their victims. Though most of the torture was ordered by the captain of the ship, there were always men aboard who found enjoyment through tormenting the captives. While drunk, some of the pirate crew aboard a ship forced an already sick captive to eat his own filth because he did not complete his duties.<sup>29</sup> Terror took all forms of hell when a ship was captured by pirates. There seemed to be no line pirates would not cross in order to plunder and rob the galleon they wanted. Among one of the most bizarre and darkly humorous stories belongs to Captain Low. Upon capturing a ship, Low wished to burn it, but as he took the crew off, he ordered the cook be tied to the mast and burned with the ship because, “being a greasy fellow would fry well in the fire.”<sup>30</sup> Pirates came up with insane methods of terror. Their “ingenuity” had no end. Henry Morgan, another reputable pirate, had men “wolded”, which involved cords being twisted around someone’s head until their eyes popped out of their skulls.<sup>31</sup> Medieval torture had moved to the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the kind of pain

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<sup>27</sup> Johnson, Charles, and David Cordingly, *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Rediker, Marcus, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 106.

<sup>29</sup> Lane, Kris E. *Pillaging the Empire: Global Piracy on the High Seas, 1500-1750*. (New York: Routledge, 2016) 171.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, Charles, and David Cordingly, *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*. 271.

<sup>31</sup> Exquemelin, A.O., and Terry Breverton., *The Illustrated Pirate Diaries: a Remarkable Eyewitness Account of Captain Morgan and the Buccaneers*. 125.

and execution pirates were subjecting their captives to. Terrorism did not end at flags for pirates, no, physically inflicted terror was part of the job too.

Terrorists stop at nothing. There is a cause and the cause, so engrained in the being of who the person is, creates action, resulting in terror. The Islam extremists behind the 9/11 attacks did not just fly planes into the Twin Towers because they felt like it; they had a purpose. Just like them, the pirates had a purpose. To steal, rob, scare, and gain, were all on their political agenda. Terror was the best way to accomplish their goals. It created a name for themselves, causing any unlucky person who might encounter them, to already be less likely to resist. The Jolly Roger served as psychological warfare, creating a sense of dread in sailors before anything physically happened. Notorious pirates with custom flags had even greater influence on the people they terrorized, having built a reputation, usually through physical terror. Pain and death are good negotiators and pirates preyed upon this. Terrorizing captives taught other crew members and even those who chose to stay on land, that no person was safe from the pirates. Making an example of ship after ship created terror among people out of thin air, just through word of mouth. Pirates fully understood terror and how to best use it for their craft. No one can deny that the sea rovers knew what they were doing by placing emblems of death on their ship's flags, or cutting open prisoner's chests to because they would not reveal where booty was hidden. Though hardly any were formally educated, pirates were well learned in the area of terror. Pirates were truly master terrorists.

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