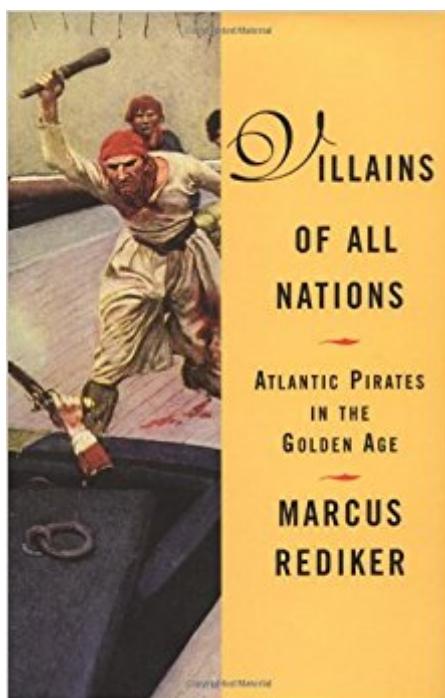


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# Villains Of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates In The Golden Age



## Synopsis

Villains of All Nations explores the 'Golden Age' of Atlantic piracy (1716-1726) and the infamous generation whose images underlie our modern, romanticized view of pirates. Rediker introduces us to the dreaded black flag, the Jolly Roger; swashbuckling figures such as Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard; and the unnamed, unlimbed pirate who was likely Robert Louis Stevenson's model for Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*. This history shows from the bottom up how sailors emerged from deadly working conditions on merchant and naval ships, turned pirate, and created a starkly different reality aboard their own ships, electing their officers, dividing their booty equitably, and maintaining a multinational social order. The real lives of this motley crew—which included cross-dressing women, people of color, and the 'outcasts of all nations'—are far more compelling than contemporary myth.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 248 pages

Publisher: Beacon Press; First Edition edition (June 15, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0807050245

ISBN-13: 978-0807050248

Product Dimensions: 8.9 x 5.6 x 0.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.5 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 25 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #499,472 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #284 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Transportation > History > Ships #471 in Books > History > Americas > Caribbean & West Indies #568 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Transportation > Ships

## Customer Reviews

Rediker (Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea), a historian of maritime labor, opens his immensely readable study of the "golden age" of piracy (1716-1726) with the spectacle of an execution in which a notorious pirate, unrepentant and seemingly unconcerned to be facing death, reties the knot of his gallows noose with defiant ironic humor. For Rediker, pirates were bold subversives who challenged the prevailing social order and empire building of the five main trading nations. Emphasizing the hardship, injustice and brutality the average sailor faced in his career, Rediker suggests that piracy offered a more egalitarian seafaring life, as well as opportunities for revenge on the ruling class. Rediker uses captives' accounts, among other sources, to show how

pirates meted out their own system of justice, torturing captains reputed for their harsh treatment of sailors, yet sparing others known for fairness. He explores pirate dialects, rituals and symbols, and shows how pirates inverted social norms, creating a carnivalesque way of life that featured fraternal solidarity, a precapitalist share system and the wanton destruction of property. A chapter on picaresque women pirates reveals links between their iconic image and Delacroix's painting *Liberty*. Using statistics to show convincingly that by the 1720s piracy posed a real threat to global trade, Rediker describes how nations launched a military-legal campaign against piracy, with cannon battles and gruesome public executions. Rediker uses this apocalyptic close of piracy's golden age to explore its suicidal side. Although Rediker's short study does not tackle later myths of piracy, it provides penetrating background to our enduring cultural fascination with the seafaring outlaws.

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The so-called golden age of Atlantic piracy was the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Lawless rebels, including well-known men such as William Fly and Edward Teach--as well as numerous social outcasts, debtors, escaped slaves, and various predatory personalities--used terrorist tactics to prey upon merchant ships from New England waters to the Spanish Main. Rediker's revealing and often surprising work views pirates and piracy within the context of the social, political, and economic milieu of the eighteenth century. He does much to deromanticize pirate life, for these were brutal, sometimes heartless men, and many of them were prime examples of a variety of social pathologies. Yet, as Rediker illustrates, pirates often did create a distinct subculture with its own set of values, codes of honor, and taboos. Rediker is most interesting and provocative in his comparisons between this subculture and the broader, "respectable" society that helped engender it. An informative look at a popular topic. Jay Freeman

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Marcus Rediker, in *Villains of all Nations*, has attempted to paint a picture of the unpleasantness of life as a sailor in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Atlantic World. Rediker shows rather convincingly that the wider public regarded sailors as inept, immature, and childlike, needing to be constantly looked after and controlled. Rediker likens the treatment of sailors to enslavement, giving ample examples of laws created in the Atlantic colonies to control sailors by limiting their rights and their mobility. In Rediker's argument, the sailor's natural inclination was to take up piracy, as it provided the only means of rebellion against the very world that had seemingly arrayed itself against him. Rediker attempts to unite these disparate groups of outlaws together by means of

a common ideology opposed to inherited authority, founded upon meritocracy. Rediker argues that pirates were thus organized in an egalitarian fashion, with plunder being divided in a much more equitable way, important decisions being put to a vote in which all men had equal voting power, and plenty of food and liquor to be had. Standing in stark contrast to the rigid discipline of the merchant world and navy, pirates set out to define their own world by making war against the existing one. Rediker does a great thing in his works by pointing out the horrid working conditions that many seamen faced in the eighteenth century. Rediker's emphasis upon this is effective to his argument, and one is inevitably led to the conclusion that piracy was the natural reaction to a life of oppressed service onboard a merchant or naval vessel. However, Rediker's strong emphasis upon the divide between authority figures and the proletariat smacks of a Marxist apologetic superimposition. Not that Marxism is anathema to historical interpretations, but to impose a thoroughly modern framework upon the past is difficult to do accurately. Were all pirates everywhere aware of the reasons why every other pirate chose to desert or mutiny and take up arms against innocent merchants? To thus unite all pirates together under one cause is painting much too broad of a stroke. While conditions by and large were not favorable to seamen, a far larger number of men continued to work in that environment than took up arms against it, making pirates somewhat of an anomaly. Rediker, while giving ample examples of the executions of pirates and their ilk, includes very little examples of pirate atrocities committed against innocent people. Rediker seems to have much too approving of a posture towards pirates, instead pointing out the "state of terror" that the state wielded as being a cause for their rebellion. After finishing Rediker's works, one must be grateful for the deep research that is apparent in them. However, one is also left desiring a more balanced analysis to the activity of Atlantic pirates.

Marcus Rediker describes his book as a "social and cultural history of early-eighteenth century pirates, those outlaws who made the last great moment in the golden age of piracy" (16). That "golden age" was 1716-26, a time when pirates terrorized the Atlantic and generated those enduring cultural images like the Jolly Roger, the black flag with skull and bones. Rediker is one fine researcher and historian. He also writes well. All that makes for interesting, pleasurable reading. It's true that Rediker's politics seem somewhere to the left of center and that this shows up in his interpretation of and sympathies with pirates. Were they simply thugs on boats? Or is it more accurate to say with the author that pirates of the golden age were really an alternative, collectivist political system that maintained a coherent outlook? I read "Villains of All Nations" with some doubts about Rediker's thesis. Even with my questions, I still like and appreciate this book with its many

great stories.

Marcus Rediker has written what is easily the most fascinating account of piracy to date. Approaching piracy from the perspective of what can only be described as an ethnographer-historian, Dr. Rediker presents us with several mind-blowing proposals:- Pirates had set up egalitarian societies, racially and sexually- Pirates were, for all the bad rap they get, rather reluctant killers- Pirates challenged a status quo that was fundamentally unjustAt first glance, it would appear that Rediker had a difficult job ahead of him. However, through careful research, he begins unraveling the mythology of piracy we receive throughÂ popular culture, and challenges our beliefs on each of those points in turn.I literally cannot recommend this book enough. If you are interested in pirates in any academic sense, I refer you to this book.Put down Defoe, before it's too late, and pick this one up. You'll thank me later.

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