

Friedrich Herrmann, *On Pirates in the Mediterranean and Their Eradication* (1815)

Abstract

The Saxon-born Friedrich Herrmann (1775–1819) made his career as a writer and *Gymnasium* teacher in the Hanseatic city of Lübeck. Herrmann first published *On Pirates in the Mediterranean and their Eradication* in 1815 as part of the Hansa cities' lobbying campaign to spur the European rulers and statesmen at the [Congress of Vienna](#) to undertake forceful measures to curtail the corsairing activities of ships from the North African Regencies of the Ottoman Empire following the end of the wars against Napoleon. Although the number of people seized by the so-called Barbary corsairs or “Barbaresken” from European ships and shores was much lower in the nineteenth century than it had been at the peak of their activity in the seventeenth century, there were still several thousand captives at the point when many were freed as a result of the Anglo-Dutch expedition of Admirals Exmouth and Capellen and their deadly bombardment of Algiers in 1816. Even this intervention, however, did not put an end to the corsair raids, which, in fact, caused renewed panic in the German Confederation in 1817, when North African ships attacked as far north as the North Sea. On that occasion, Herrmann's book was republished in an “affordable edition” [*Wohlfeile Ausgabe*] in order to spread its lobbying message among wider publics. Herrmann's rhetoric clearly invokes numerous pejorative stereotypes relating to Islamic and North African peoples, but at the same time he makes distinctions between the Ottoman imperial government and those of the North African Regencies, and between the Turkish elite and the indigenous “Moorish” population in North Africa. It is also significant that the title of the book refers to “pirates” rather than to the more technically correct term corsairs, that is, involving ships acting with the approval of their governments rather than outside the law.

Source

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One would be hard pressed to find a people whose character is more marked by a deep and general corruption than the present-day inhabitants of these regions. The Hurons and New Zealanders are angels of light in comparison; how true it is that partial or false illumination is worse than darkness itself. Each page in the recent annals of barbarism is written in blood; nearly every fact they report arouses outrage and disgust. While despotism has robbed their minds of all strength, for the slaves who bowed before the throne, crime or vice in high places must necessarily lose its hatefulnes and appear worthy of emulation. But now, murder, treason, disloyalty, the filthiest and most dishonorable avarice, merciless severity, cruel haughtiness, outrageous despotism, prodigality, and even gluttony are the traits that mark the governments in these climes, especially in recent centuries. Meanwhile, history also accuses the later caliphs, the Sofis and the Mongol and Ottoman rulers of errors of the same kind. However, although one cannot always approve of the conduct of these monarchs, their peoples have until very recent times retained a rough decency, a crude righteousness, a sense of chivalry, a certain romanticism, to which one returns with pleasure, while at the foot of Atlas few traces remain of that national nobility, and all individualities that emerge are too common and, indeed, too bad to leave a deep or at least pleasant impression on the mind. The Moor, once excellent in strength and knowledge and manners under the Marabouts and the Ommiads, has become a barbarian whose receptiveness for all things high and worthy appears quite deadened by the influences of unfortunate circumstance.

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The eradication of the pirates is necessary because the honor of states demands it. Can any European government concede without blushing to being forced to pay tribute to a horde of barbarians whom it despises? We may avoid the hated word as assiduously as we wish, but that which we pay to the Barbary pirates under the name of gifts or annuities is tribute, all the more disgraceful because it is used to purchase from crude and headstrong men the advantages that Nature has granted us and them equally.

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The eradication of the pirates is necessary because international trade prescribes it. That it belongs to the problems that mankind must solve is clear from the arrangements of Nature, which granted that which is necessary to the North and that which is pleasant to the South, while filling the inhabitants of the entire earth with an ineradicable desire for both. And where might the most suitable market for it be, if not at the portal to three inexhaustibly rich worlds, the eternal giant Pillars of Hercules, through which Nature did not by mere chance route the most splendid, the richest in ports and the least dangerous sea? How little one would understand this suggestion, however, if a handful of barbarians were allowed to continue to wreak havoc on its back, and the vehicles involved in that trade allowed themselves to be plundered! They may have been tolerated in olden times, when notions of trade among nations were still limited and petty, and because they were regarded as one of the hindrances to the latter, which some states believed they could not multiply enough, so that they looked the other way at their cruelties. The liberality of views about commerce that our age has acquired, as well as the altered state of affairs, have sounded their death knell once and for all. The nations of the earth have more need of each other than ever before; they are joined together by a thousand connections unknown to the older world, and a thousand new ones are yet to be created; world trade will be led towards its ideals more quickly and energetically than many other things. And can the peoples allow the points where they intersect and exchange their wealth with one another to be surrounded by greedy packs of robbers who hope to harvest in foul air that which busy industry has sown? Destroy the barbarous brood! cries injured national interest; Destruction! Reason repeats with seriousness and strictness, with which it goes hand in hand.

Finally, this eradication of the pirates is necessary because humanity's drive towards cultivation demands it. Mankind mourns that a sea upon which it was accustomed thousands of years ago to see only its noblest sons, that a disowned race has been permitted for so long to use as the disgraceful showplace for its wicked deeds, that the body of water upon which love from all zones was supposed to seek and find itself has been abused by hatred for centuries systematically to commit incessant atrocities. It is no longer willing to accept unavenged that which it has groaningly tolerated for so long. Its every sentiment bristles at the thought that solitary corsairs lurk on the shores of cultivated nations, that light and darkness dwell at such close quarters, that barbarism lies upon the bosom of civility, sucking away at its precious vital fluids, and the most ingenious and well-meaning of their designs are nipped in the bud. It seeks—this is its nature and its divine destiny—constantly to increase the treasure chest of insight and knowledge that it has accumulated through investigations in ancient and modern times; it wishes to gather in a great flower basket all things shaped by Nature, all things properly conceived and beautifully felt by humankind, so that the industry of new thinkers may collect honey for the mind and heart. To this end, all lands, all coasts must be accessible to mankind, so that it may choose all things necessary and freely produced, so that customs and opinions may rub shoulders, and world trade is the great wheel that it sets in motion to satisfy this need. Anyone who disrupts this is an enemy. Can we wish to spare this enemy and become traitors to mankind? Could we maintain a dishonorable agreement with the former, and lay shackles upon the great progress of the latter? This latter was limned by God. His voice sounds deep in our hearts. Woe unto him so distracted or benumbed by the bombastic babbling of worldly woes and errant worlds that he no longer hears it and feels called to work towards anything but the great interest of humanity!

Verily, it is a just and holy war that we begin. It will check great ills, and the results will be equally

delightful for all. What is more, who are the presumptuous offenders sought by our vengeful sword? They are cruel despots sensible as little of the need to be loved as of the duty to be just, whose existence is marked only by all manner of avanias,^[1] and who suck their own peoples dry, pushing them to the edge of wretchedness. They are heartless interlopers who have forced themselves upon the inhabitants and, once they have attained power and respect, unable to forget that those inhabitants once saw them arrive naked and exposed, therefore take revenge upon them through humiliation and extortion, arrogance and brutality. If the Christians are hated by these fanatical inhabitants, they hate these brutal governments far more, through whose long existence their states remain among the ranks of political monsters. Far from incurring their hostility, the expulsion of these despots will instead give us a claim upon their gratitude and be the first step towards a thorough and genuine reconciliation between Moors and Christians. At least if we send the Turks back into the wilderness and dungeons of Asia Minor, from which some of them have escaped, we need not fear committing even the slightest injustice against the natives.

And this just and holy war must suffer no delay! Now or never must be our watchword! For what you have recognized as proper and useful for mankind is better done today than tomorrow, for the latter can already enjoy the fruits of your efforts tomorrow, which you, as much as possible, are duty-bound not to withhold from them one instant longer than necessary. A new, richer, fuller and more humane life shall be given to the peoples of Europe, a life offering adequate recompense for the days passed in great affliction, a life, finally, in which it is granted to the genius of mankind to reach its objective with swifter progress and to achieve what it missed under the twenty years of pressure of restrictive domination. Or is this not every heart's desire? Not the will of the noble princes who united for Europe's salvation? Not the tendency of the unparalleled war that fertilized with blood every field from Moscow to the Seine? Not the well-deserved recompense for heroic and universal efforts such as we scarcely find in the annals of history?

If, however, we are to live this better life, the foundations for it must be laid, and every shackle that binds the wings of the mind must be shed, every barrier that obstructs progress must be lowered, taking us back to olden times and paralyzing the activity of nations. The commerce among peoples must be free and unrestricted, the exchange of their goods and their ideas, and in the great new segment in the annals of humanity that is now beginning, there must be no more talk of piracies on a sea that destiny intends to be one of the freest on earth. And where can the regulations aimed at eradicating these barbarians be made more easily and safely than at a congress that brings together envoys from all the European powers? Should it disperse without having taken the necessary decisions, it is plain that particular interests, the difficulty of communication and the prolixity in defining the contingent of power that every state has to contribute to the common cause will expose us to new centuries of harassment by the Barbary pirates. Moreover, what more suitable time could be found for such a glorious undertaking than the present, when not only are the governments of the Barbary Coast once again mocking all of Europe, and bringing forward more outrageous demands than ever, but the blossoming of peoples is also breathing a self-confidence that rebels against all pressures and refuses to allow its fatherland to suffer such disgrace unpunished? A truly chivalrous frame of mind, that is, one oriented towards the highest in mankind, lives in our youth; a sacred flame, lit by persecuted truth, maintained by worthy deeds, upheld by God's visible assistance and the victory granted by Him, burns in their breasts. How could this fire be better used than if those eager for battle were permitted to take up the gauntlet thrown down by the Barbary pirates and avenge Europe's insulted honor? Let the god of war rage again before we can enjoy the new, splendid existence, let him rage for the last time! The blood shed for this cause will nourish palm trees of immortality, and the peoples who sacrificed it will live in honor and blessings. We close as we began: Now or never!

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NOTES

[1] A tax or fee imposed on foreigners under the Ottoman Empire—eds.

Source: *Ueber die Seeräuber im Mittelmeer und ihre Vertilgung* (1815). A People's Wish to the Illustrious Congress in Vienna. With the necessary historical and statistical explanations, by Friedrich Herrmann, Aulic Councilor of Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt, Doctor of Philosophy, Professor at the Gymnasium in Lübeck, member of several learned societies. Affordable edition. Lübeck: Niemann, 1817, pp. 15–16, 351–58.

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