

Report on Gangs of Robbers in the Rhineland (1804)

Abstract

One consequence of the devastation caused by the Seven Years' War was an increase in poverty and resulting crime. This report from 1804, based on investigation files, describes how the region on the Rhine and Moselle was plagued by gangs of thieves and robbers for years while investigators faced various difficulties. The territorial fragmentation of the Holy Roman Empire made police work considerably more difficult, especially as criminals and gangs often had a high degree of mobility. The author was a justice of the peace in the Rhine-Moselle *departement* on the left bank of the Rhine, which belonged to France at the time, and as such played a key role in the prosecution of various robber gangs, such as that of the notorious "Schinderhannes."

Source

Documentary History of the Various Gangs of Robbers on the Two Banks of the Rhine

No. 1 Moselle Gang.

Robbers and murderers are a common phenomenon in times of hardship.

On this very soil, which in our time was a hotbed of thieving gangs, during the Seven Years' War and the great famine the rabble battled the police, which was even more powerless in those days. The defiant brigands sought protection in the division of the territories then, just as they do now in the division of political opinion. Then, as now, we see the good will of governments disgraced by country folk's chimeric fear.

As before, the terrible state of affairs began with horse theft. When the Moselle hills, the Soonwald and the Hochwald were claimed in turn by German and French troops, a number of young daredevils among the local population took the opportunity to abduct the draft animals from the enemy camps. They did not consider it to be a crime. Did it harm the enemy? No matter how it occurred! The rough countryman knows nothing of the customs of war. Many a Frank met his death in the forests and country cottages! He was the foe of the fatherland's armies.

This thought stifled any better human feelings, even the natural rights of hospitality, and it was (why not say it out loud?) sanctified, with all of its terrible consequences, because certain officials promised impunity, one hundred officers approved of it, and priests gave their blessing.

Most of the stolen horses were sold and stabled in the scattered farmsteads and mills and in remote villages. They were spoils of war, and nobody thought any more of it.

Without engaging here in long-winded investigations, we need only examine the notions of uneducated folk. It is there that we will find the reasons why many a robber who was familiar to children on the street and vehemently pursued by the police nevertheless did not flee a country where he faced shameful captivity and death at every step. It is common to all crude natures to cling firmly to their habits. Every notion that has once taken hold of them, however disgraceful, they cultivate with the greatest care, taking pleasure in it, and with every passing day it engraves itself deeper into their hearts. We knew one brigand, whom we will discuss in more detail below, who could be moved to an immediate confession if one spoke to him of the beauty of this or that horse he had stolen. Even murder no longer seemed outrageous to another, who with coldblooded fervor spoke a devout *paternoster* for the unfortunate soul

of the man he had just murdered at his victim's grave.

This devotion to the accustomed ensured that all horse thieves remained horse thieves, continuing ever further on their career paths. The war had silenced justice, and some of those public officials entrusted with policing were driven from the country. When the Frankish forces remained victorious, however, and marched into the hostile provinces far from the borders, with every passing day it became more difficult to steal army horses. The thieves thus turned to farmers' horses. In this business, too, the robbers found their places of refuge as before. No miller or tenant farmer who had previously purchased or hidden army horses could close his house to the robber; the robber could betray him and he would soon find himself in the hands of the victors.

Within a short time, all farms, mills and forest cabins became criminal haunts. The physical character of the land and the misfortune of the war played their role here. Impunity made the robbers ever bolder. The ease with which they could enjoy delicious food without much labor every day, the comfort that all rough men find in an unsettled way of life, the fear and indeed obedience that the savage fellows instilled in the countryfolk through their audacious assaults were excellent lures. And willing girls appeared as well, and the people were free and easy and held sway for a lack of law and order. Under such circumstances, beggars and robbers are the happiest of kings.

A beginning having been made in this way, some other favorable circumstances arose that proved advantageous to the robbers. All the renegades whom the German armies had left behind were easy to entice, and every wandering minstrel and itinerant trinket seller was a welcome recruit. As long as the Frankish troops remained in these regions the serpent crept silently, for the officers were always prepared to respond with force of arms to any request by the civil authorities. To be sure, this aid was but temporary, for as soon as there was a change of commander, his successor, in ignorance of the seriousness of the crime, often, at the insistence of his relatives and not seldom also bought with gifts, opened the jails and set the little-regarded robbers free. Warriors in the field have little time to sit in judgement over common criminals, whose often complicated legal cases have no political connection. When, however, they too had moved on to other regions, their mischief became so outrageous that the policing authorities, wholly impotent in those days, were nevertheless forced to take one final step.

[...]

The minutes of the conference taken on that day state, among other things, "the masterless rabble has so greatly increased in this region for some time now that no one dares cross a field unaccompanied in the daytime and not at all at night, for fear of maltreatment or robbery; every day horses are stolen from their stables, and the poor countryman must pay off the thieves or the like in order to recover his property."

It was resolved: 1) to announce publicly that no person may be housed without a passport; 2) that the number of watchmen is to be doubled both day and night; 3) to undertake a general patrol on the night of 30th to 31st December, and 4) to leave the investigation to the *foro deprehensionis* and the final judgement to three neighboring legal scholars and sworn officials. – There were a few exceptions to the final point, however.

As in nearly all the general patrols that followed, not a single thief was caught here. The public officials were utterly disheartened.

The differences of political opinion had awakened the seeds of mutual distrust. The reorganization of the country approached. All social ties were nearly wholly cut asunder, and the evil grew with every passing day.

Matters were no better on the left bank of the Moselle. The officials there had not once shown the will to

contain the terrible state of affairs.

Especially in the region where the departements of the Saar and the Rhine and Moselle meet, the dark, inhospitable and always unsafe forests of the Moselle hills served as headquarters for a mighty gang. It was in that very place that a gang of robbers made their home immediately following the Seven Years' War and persisted for a long time. The so-called Reilerhals has been a notorious spot for many years; at the very top, surrounded by dense forest, was a little chapel, which nocturnal walkers could not pass but with a shudder. Spectacles were performed there that only tales of more recent, perhaps more terrible events have replaced in our nurseries. The immorality of those times has persisted in some areas of the region, passed on from father to son.

Fortunate enough that the horrible Moselle gang had submitted to no leader. Each man did business on his own account, and only when there was an act of violence to be committed did the individual robbers join forces. Here, too, their chief business was stealing horses, but it was the very saddest one for the poor countryman. After working hard all day, he was forced to keep watch before his stall at night and protect his horses. This gang plied its trade far into the Eifel, the Hunsrück, beyond Trier and on the Mayenfeld.

Schinderhannes himself is a humane robber compared to some of the individuals in this horde, who wielded the assassin's dagger and the arsonist's torch. Burning houses, murdered wanderers and an entire strangled family are the bloody adornments in this ghastly spectacle.

Source of original German text: Johann Nikolaus Becker, *Actenmäßige Geschichte der Räuberbanden an den beyden Ufern des Rheins*, Cologne, 1804, pp. 3–9. Available online at: <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/view/bsb10393756?page=%2C1>

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