

Preface to the Japanese edition of *Life Under the Jolly Roger: Reflections on Golden Age Piracy*

In April 2010, ten Somali pirates were arrested by Dutch soldiers after boarding the German-registered freighter *Taipan* near the Somali coast. They were handed over to German authorities, which led to the first piracy trial in Germany in four hundred years. The trial was held at the district court of Hamburg, the country's most famous port, where the legendary pirate Klaus Störtebeker and 72 of his men were executed in 1401.

The Somali pirates escaped this fate. In October 2012, they were sentenced to prison terms between two and seven years. During the trial, a support campaign for them was organized, which included public talks and discussions, demonstrations outside the courthouse, legal advice, and a solidarity fund. The campaign was primarily run by political radicals. This was no coincidence.

The piracy that we have witnessed along the coast of Somalia in recent years is, in many ways, very different from the piracy of the so-called Golden Age, which is the subject of this book. Modern-day pirates use speedboats, machine guns, and satellite navigation systems, not sailing vessels, grappling hooks, and magnetic compasses. Modern-day pirates also have a limited interest in the cargo that merchant ships carry; they are more interested in getting a hold of the ship itself, including its crew, in order to demand a ransom. Finally, modern-day pirates don't constitute a society of seaborne outlaws, uprooted, and with its own laws and regulations; instead, they live in coastal towns as regular members of the community and engage in piracy as an illegal profession. Still, also their lives and actions contain elements that attract radical activists: they challenge the law and international powers; they interfere with capitalist trade; they risk their lives for riches rather than working underpaid jobs; and they retain elements of the noble robber: they take from the rich to give to the poor, and they defend the waters of their ancestors against overfishing and toxic waste. In short, the myth of the outlaw pirate as a political rebel is alive.

It is this myth that is explored in *Life Under the Jolly Roger*, which looks back at the time in which the myth was born: In the late seventeenth century, a motley crew of ex-mercenaries, runaway slaves, adventurers, and mutineers decided to set sail from the colonies in the Caribbean to "wage war on the whole world", which meant, primarily, the political authorities of the day who these people felt betrayed and oppressed by. For about thirty-five years, this motley crew did indeed spread fear among the powerful in the Caribbean, the Americas, the Indian Ocean, and along the West Coast of Africa, before being hunted down and exterminated. Their exploits became legendary and made the pirate life famous worldwide: colonial rulers and businessmen saw them as their fiercest enemies; in Europe, everyday people were treated to theater plays about the wild life in the autonomous pirate republics of Madagascar; and the moguls of India lost some of their most precious possessions when the pirates advanced all the way into the Red Sea. It is this era, the "Golden Age" of piracy, that has given us all of the popular pirate images we know: extravagant

clothing, earrings, peg legs, cutlasses, and parrots resting on scar-faced men's shoulders. It is also this era that has given us the ultimate pirate symbol of them all: the Jolly Roger, the menacing pirate flag, usually featuring a simple image of skull and bones against a black background. It conveyed a simple message: we defy your authority, we stand our ground, and we do so with joy and pride. Few symbols have become so closely attached to an unrepentant commitment to freedom and independence. This attachment is still alive today.

The Jolly Roger does not only attract political radicals. It attracts a huge number of people, even if most of them prefer the safe world of fiction and fantasy, rather than political activism. Most people dream of freedom and independence, even if – for different reasons – they are not ready or able to fight for it in their daily lives. Tales of pirates work as welcome substitutes. This explains the success of so many pirate-themed stories, not least the enormously successful *One Piece* manga series. But it is the political activists who try to turn these dreams into reality.

We don't have to go far to find confirmation of the Jolly Roger's ongoing popularity among political activists. Various projects and organizations have used Jolly Roger-based logos and images, among them The Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, Earth First!, and the CrimethInc. Ex-Workers Collective. The flag is a regular sight at mass protests, from rallies for file sharing and the free flow of online information to demonstrations against austerity measures and to Occupy camps. Sometimes, the Jolly Roger is even displayed on ships, providing the message with particular strength: in October 2010, for example, union members of the French CGT brought a Jolly Roger aboard a ferry shuttle in Marseille's old port to protest against the French government's pension reforms, while in October 2011, Russian activists hoisted a Jolly Roger on the cruiser *Aurora*, an important symbol of the October Revolution, in order to draw attention to poverty in Russia ahead of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty.

In the end, the question pursued in this book is simple: Is there more to this embrace of the Jolly Roger in activist circles than mere romanticization? Is it a simple gesture of provocation and defiance, or do the pirates of the Golden Age actually have to teach us something? Did they set examples for a better way of life? Did they develop morals that can serve as guidelines even in contemporary struggles? Some historians deny this categorically. Others affirm it enthusiastically. My own thoughts are contained in this book.

The fact that *Life Under the Jolly Roger* is now available in Japanese honors me. I thank the publisher, translator, and all of my Japanese friends. I also want to thank every single reader. Without readers, writers are nothing. Together, let us not forget: Whatever our conclusions regarding the legacy of the pirates might be, the most important thing is to collectively build a better world.

Gabriel Kuhn, Stockholm, August 2013