

Privateering Activities in 16th Century England and Spain's Response

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Abstract. Privateering activities reached their peak in the 16th to 17th centuries, particularly in England's intervention against Spain at sea, partly due to the influence of the Nordic pirate tradition and the political and economic challenges faced during Queen Elizabeth I's reign. With Elizabeth I's relaxation of the conditions for issuing "Letters of Marque", the number of privateering activities in England increased significantly. Through examination of historical documents, this paper clarifies the increase in the number of British raiders, the plundering of Spanish merchant ships in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans by privateers, and Spain's military and diplomatic responses to official British actions. By arguing these facts, this paper aims to reflect the maritime conflicts between England and Spain at the end of the 16th century as comprehensively as possible, to improve disciplinary research results. Through these historical events, it is worth contemplating how countries today can enhance international security and address their own crises.

Keywords: Privateering, Queen Elizabeth I, Spain, Letter of Marque.

1. Introduction

In the 16th century, with the rise of maritime power and the expansion of the global trade network, English privateering became a form of challenge to the Spanish Empire, reflecting not only the geopolitical competition among European powers at that time but also prompting Spain to take a series of countermeasures, which largely shaped the international maritime order at that time.

Research on privateering pirates in China has been concentrated in the past 20 years. For example, Tian Zehua's "A Study on England's Privateering in Sixteenth Century" [1], details the background, reasons, and impacts of English privateering. In Liu Dalin's "The Study of the English Pirate and privateering in 16th century" [2], the history and long-term impact of privateers in England are discussed more meticulously. From another perspective, Wang Qin's "Pirates and the construction of the English Navy (1558-1588)" takes a different approach, discussing the historical connection between privateers and naval construction at a micro level [3]. Research on the privateer "Francis Drake" has been relatively well-developed, as detailed in Xia Jiguo's article "Drake's Circumnavigation and Elizabethan Diplomacy", which is also mentioned in the above literature [4].

These works provide detailed descriptions of the origins, actions, and achievements of British royal pirates. However, they do not delve much into specific interactions with Spain. At the same time, most of the papers focus on exposition, relatively lacking in presenting the performance and achievements of royal pirates with examples or specific data. Therefore, this paper focuses on the counterattacks of British privateers against Spain, aiming to answer the above questions.

2. Historical Background of the Rise of Privateering

The reason why England plundered Spain is closely related to the huge benefits Spain obtained in the Age of Discovery. In the 16th century, Spain unexpectedly discovered a large amount of precious metal and agricultural resources in the American colonies, opening the era of the Columbian Exchange. Meanwhile, using the wealth brought by the colonies, Magellan opened the western route to the East. This circumnavigation crossed the Pacific, discovered the Philippines, and laid the foundation for the subsequent Spanish galleon trade between the Philippines and the American colonies [5].

Moreover, Europe itself also had a certain pirate tradition. The Norse pirates (Vikings) were active in regions such as Norway, Sweden, and Denmark from 800 to 1100 AD. The purpose of Norse pirates was plunder and exploration, and their attacks on England were very frequent, and they even established pirate bases in Normandy [6]. Norse pirate activities in England gradually ceased only after the establishment of the Norman dynasty, but this period undoubtedly laid the groundwork for the prosperity of British privateers. European pirate activities did not stagnate after the decline of Norse pirates; instead, it became a venture in which most countries participated.

During the 16th century, England also faced extremely thorny political and economic issues. Other Western European countries that did not catch the “Age of Discovery” trend actively earned profits through trade, but England’s trade with the European continent was not optimistic. At the same time, Elizabeth I’s accession to the throne was marked by a fierce political struggle, and her diplomatic relations with other countries were far from optimistic. Originally, Spain and England maintained a good relationship, but with Queen Elizabeth’s reign being fraught with religious disputes, this relationship was shattered [2]. Moreover, England was undergoing in a political transition from feudalism to capitalism, indicating that the political foundation of the queen was not stable. To deal with these crises, financial security was indispensable.

In summary, the plundering behavior of British privateers originated from two main factors: one was the plundering tradition deeply rooted in history, stemming from the cultural influence of Norse pirates; the other was the major economic challenges faced by England during the 16th century. During this period, England faced severe political and economic challenges, political instability, and economic pressure, prompting England to adopt more radical and adventurous maritime strategies. Privateering became a means to solve these difficulties to some extent, reflecting England’s strategic choices in defending national interests and expanding overseas influence.

3. The Rise of Privateering and England’s Plunder of Spanish Merchant Ships

The rise of privateering marks a more extreme and aggressive posture adopted by England in maritime activities, particularly in competition with Spain, reflecting the pursuit of national strategic interests. The following part explores the specific actions of privateering pirates in detail.

There is a certain distinction between privateers and pirates. According to the New Oxford Dictionary, privateer means “an armed ship owned and officered by private individuals holding a government commission and authorized for use in war, especially in the capture of merchant shipping [7].” Although similar to pirates in many ways, privateers differ from pirates in two key aspects, with the primary distinction being that privateers operated with official recognition. Moreover, while pirates engaged in plundering indiscriminately, privateers focused on merchant ships of other countries.

3.1. The Mass Issuance and Impact of Letters of Marque

After Elizabeth I ascended the throne, she tacitly allowed pirates to plunder Spanish merchant ships while issuing letters of marque, consolidating scattered “pirates” into officially legitimate “privateers.” The issuance of letter of marque did not originate during the reign of Elizabeth I; their essential purpose was to allow ship owners to reclaim their property by force when ordinary merchant ships were plundered and legal procedures failed to resolve the loss.

However, during Elizabeth I’s reign, the issuance of letters of marque significantly increased, and pirates could easily obtain this credential. Meanwhile, the scope of these permissions became more limited, with plundering permits almost exclusively targeting Spanish merchant ships. This issuance of Letter of Marque greatly increased England’s enthusiasm for plundering Spanish vessels, as many English pirates plundered Spanish merchant ships to curry favor with the queen, thereby obtaining these permissions. This led to a larger-scale and legally sanctioned plundering Spanish merchant ships.

In terms of the absolute number of letters of marque issued, the number of privateers experienced an “explosive growth” in the late 16th century. According to records, from June 1585 to March 1586,

England issued 88 letters of marque. Between 1589 and 1591, 236 ships set sail for privateering, with most of them active along the Spanish coast [8].

After the letter of marque were modified by Queen Elizabeth I to become readily available documents, the number of privateers also greatly increased. Privateering fleets lurked in the English Channel, waiting for opportunities. The next section will discuss the situation of privateers and explain where they plundered Spanish ships.

3.2. Privateers' Plunder of Spanish Merchant Ships

Spain had two main maritime routes: one connecting North America with mainland Spain, known as the Atlantic route, and the other connecting the colonial Philippines with South America, known as the Pacific route, namely the Manila Galleon trade. English raiders focused on the Atlantic. Their plundering was mainly concentrated along the Spanish coastline, but privateers existed on the route from Spain to the American colonies as well, with English privateers appearing in the Caribbean Sea and Panama, confirming this point.

However, compared to the trade of galleons between Spain and its mainland colonies, the Manila Galleon trade was not heavily disrupted by English privateers, possibly due to the distance from England being too far and the cost of plundering being too high. Privateers did venture into the Pacific, with a typical example being Drake's fleet. His circumnavigation attacked Spanish colonies located on the eastern side of the Pacific, such as Chile and Peru, before successfully returning to England. However, apart from Drake's fleet, there are no records of British privateers plundering Spanish ships or coastal colonies in the Pacific.

Different plundering routes resulted in a variety of ship sizes. According to Kenneth R. Andrews' records, armed merchant ships of privateers varied in size, with the largest tonnage exceeding 300 tons, while some ships were less than 50 tons. There were two forms of privateering: one was privateering cruising companies in which only privateers and suppliers investing in plundering participate, with a smaller scale and relatively limited range of activities; while most privateering activities, such as those exemplified by Drake, were semi-official adventures invested in by the British government. These activities were large in scale, had a wide range of operations, and were heavily invested in, quickly becoming the mainstream form.

Privateering trade does not mean unbridled plundering like piracy. Once a letter of marque was obtained, privateers could only plunder Spain. This targeting behavior can be traced back to 1559, when England and France signed a treaty promising not to issue "letters of marque" to each other's subjects. However, England did not stop issuing them but limited the issuance to plundering against Spain. The distribution of plunder after plundering depended on the Naval Admiralty Court controlled by naval officers. According to records, the Admiral of the Navy would take 10% of the wealth of the booty, while the Queen would take 5% of the overall wealth as customs duties, and then the remaining portion would be divided equally among the captain, crew, and suppliers [9].

The rise of privateering not only revealed England's more extreme and aggressive strategies in its maritime competition with Spain but also reflected its steadfast pursuit of expanding national strategic interests. Through officially authorized a letter of marque, England successfully legalized traditional pirate activities and transformed them into effective means of countering Spanish maritime power. Privateers' plundering of Spain was widespread along Spanish routes, and through clear organizational forms and distribution of booty, these spoils effectively flowed into England's mainland as profits, which in turn supported privateers, thus bolstering their scale. England's privateering activities in the 16th-century maritime competition embodied its extreme aggressive strategies against Spain and its pursuit of expanding strategic interests.

By issuing official letters of marque, England legalized pirate activities and effectively used them to counter Spanish maritime power. English privateers were active in both the Atlantic and the Pacific, from the Spanish coast to the Far Eastern colonies. Despite distance and cost limitations, their determination to pursue wealth and challenge Spain, as demonstrated by Drake's circumnavigation, was evident. The changing scale and form of privateering, from individual ventures to semi-official

investments, demonstrated privateering's contribution to England's rise in maritime power. The privateering policy and distribution of booty revealed the economic and political considerations behind it, reflecting how the state controlled and utilized privateering activities. However, as England engaged in this non-confrontational confrontation with Spain, Spain naturally would not sit idly by. Diplomatically and militarily, Spain took different countermeasures to deal with England's challenges.

4. Spain's Responses

4.1. Spain's Diplomatic Opposition to England

Spain attempted various diplomatic measures, such as verbal demands and the detention of English merchant ships, to pressure England into responding to its grievances, but with little effect. King Philip II of Spain was highly dissatisfied with Queen Elizabeth I's privateering policy and repeatedly expressed his anger to the queen through ambassadors, demanding a response [10]. However, Queen Elizabeth I consistently sheltered privateering activities and avoided this topic. After England's unsuccessful assistance to the Dutch in their bid for independence in the 1570s, diplomatic relations between England and Spain deteriorated rapidly. Seizing this opportunity, Spain took an even firmer stance against English pirates, demanding that England arrest them directly and return Spanish goods.

However, Queen Elizabeth I never responded positively to Philip II's demands. As England's maritime power grew over time, the queen's responses to Spain became increasingly assertive. When Spanish ambassadors demanded a response regarding Drake's plundering of Spain during his circumnavigation, the queen directly stated, after thorough investigation, that Drake had not harmed Spanish interests. Before the outbreak of war, Elizabeth had been using such rhetoric to exonerate privateers.

4.2. Spain's Military Counterattacks and the Outbreak of the Anglo-Spanish War

Diplomatic failures led to extreme military actions. In 1585, when the Netherlands revolted again, Elizabeth I sent troops to assist, which finally prompted Spain's military counterattack. However, the fundamental reason for the escalation of Anglo-Spanish tensions remained England's rampant privateering activities. English privateers' plundering of Spanish merchant ships seriously affected Spain's profit and maritime security.

To retaliate against England, in 1568, Spain launched a sudden attack on English merchant ships sheltering in the port of San Juan de Ulúa due to a storm, causing heavy casualties and directly plunging both England and Spain into a semi-armed confrontation. The jubilant atmosphere in England upon Drake's return from his circumnavigation in 1577 further infuriated Spain. The escalating contradictions between England and Spain eventually led to the Anglo-Spanish War, erupting during the Dutch Revolt.

5. Conclusion

By organizing and expanding upon past literature, this paper has elucidated the specific details of English plundering behavior, aiming to provide a relatively objective analysis from the perspectives of both England and Spain during this period of conflict. The intention is to reconstruct the scene of England's privateering at its zenith as accurately as possible and to sort out existing Chinese research materials, which serves as a basic reference for future researchers studying English privateering and the Anglo-Spanish War. Additionally, based on the foundation of researching English privateering, further studies can focus on the Golden Age of piracy after the early 18th-century privateering out of control and the historical evolution of international maritime law in the late modern period.

On the other hand, the world today is full of conflicts and wars, with most regions teetering on the brink of war. At this critical moment, analyzing past wars is necessary. Through these historical events, it is worth contemplating how countries today can enhance international security and address

their own crises. The study is the author's initial attempt at exploring this topic. It is hoped that future researchers can further provide more comprehensive insights into the subject.

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