Who profits from war? Are there ways that military conflict can strengthen communities and economies, and what are the mechanisms by which this can occur? These questions underpin Henning Hillmann’s detailed network analysis of the merchant community of Saint-Malo, France, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The answer to the first question, for Hillmann, is privateers or corsairs, those maritime venturers who sailed with government authorization to seize enemy vessels and split the value of these prizes. Although privateering is often dubbed “legal piracy,” this study is not about swashbuckling sea battles. Instead, Hillmann focuses on the Breton outfitters (armateurs) who funded these ventures, and the positive impact that prize-taking could have on a particular region. Building on careful statistical analysis, he argues that privateering enterprise (the course) was an “organizational linchpin” that operated as a social connector to hold different strata of a community together (p. 9).

Outfitting a vessel that could successfully capture a fully loaded merchant ship was much more affordable than investing in a long-distance trading voyage itself, but it still cost thousands of livres tournois (p. 85). To share the burden of these costs, armateurs entered into partnership agreements, often involving dozens of investors. These documents, along with records of the poll tax (capitation), provide Hillmann with valuable archival evidence of some of these ambitious commercial ventures. They enable him to begin to answer another question that motivates The Corsairs of Saint-Malo: Network Organization of a Merchant Elite Under the Ancien Régime: How did these profit-hungry men decide whom to trust? Hillmann advances several claims about “social cohesion,” contending that privateering was different from other types of trade. Within the small, tight-knit Catholic community, families who did business together also frequently intermarried. But, Hillmann finds, the course was particularly effective at enabling people to find new trading partners. In this high-stakes environment, merchants seemed to trust other men who had previously made course deals with mutual partners. They evidently operated under the motto that “a friend of a friend is a friend of mine” (p. 219).

Naturally, these business relationships ebbed and flowed. Building on important studies of Saint-Malo by André Lespagnol, Hillmann notes two distinct phases in Malouian history.[1] The
first group of elite merchants grew so wealthy from their overseas investments that in the 1720s they largely ceased participating in maritime trade and began to function as quasi-nobility. By the 1760s, a group of “new men” had emerged to try their luck as armateurs, a strategy that worked until the turmoil of the Revolution severed the community bonds that Hillmann has traced.

The first half of the volume provides historical context: chapter 2 outlines Saint-Malo’s distinctive position in the Atlantic economy, ideally poised for trade but also exposed to naval threats. The town’s economic ups and downs, which differ from elsewhere in France, make it an intriguing case study. In chapter 3, on social sources of economic growth, Hillmann draws attention to the impact of the Compagnie des Indes on Saint-Malo and the repercussions after John Law ended their trade concession in 1719. Profit-seeking merchants needed something new to invest in, but as France was not then at war privateering was not an option. The two decades from 1721 to 1740 are a notably lengthy stretch without conflict and therefore provide a valuable peacetime scenario that enriches Hillmann’s analysis of five key conflicts: the War of the League of Augsburg (1688-97), the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-13), the War of the Austrian Succession (1744-48), the Seven Years’ War (1756-63), and the American Revolutionary War (1778-83).

Chapter 4 reviews the historical origins and legal definitions that distinguished privateering from piracy. As Geoffrey Symcox notes and Hillman reiterates, the course was a decentralized instrument of naval warfare, one that “promised both profit and glory” to private entrepreneurs (pp. 90-91). Chapter 5 attempts to quantify the profits that the armateurs made from their voyages. Hillmann suggests that the course should be viewed as “more democratic” than long-distance trade because it was possible to participate by investing with small shares (p. 149). The considerable financial windfall that could come from capturing enemy vessels was was enough to motivate many investors to take their chance. Interestingly, once they enjoyed a degree of success in the course, they usually branched out into other, more stable maritime ventures such as the Newfoundland fishery, trade with Iberia, and, less frequently, the transatlantic slave trade. It is these “polyvalent” portfolios of investments that interest Hillmann, as they tended to result in longer careers than the course alone (p. 207).

In chapter 6, Hillmann turns finally to detailed network analysis. After asking readers for their patience with the technical discussion, he carefully explains the figures and network diagrams to historians unfamiliar with concepts such as “dyads” and “cohesion.” This sophisticated analysis enables him to prove, for instance, that certain patterns of partnership ties could not arise from chance alone (p. 166). Still, readers might wish for additional details about the social history of the individuals represented in the network diagrams and tables. Chapter 7 does provide some insights into the men who participated in these partnerships, introducing two wealthy armateurs who stood out among the second set of “new” merchants but took different routes to get there. One was the younger (cadet) son of the Chateaubriand dynasty while the other, Pierre-Jacques Meslé de Grandglos, descended from a grandfather who had been a humble Newfoundland fisherman. Responding to Lespagnol’s claim that the seventeenth-century nobles ultimately abandoned their maritime roots, Hillmann asserts that for this second cohort “theirs was a nobility born out of commerce” (p. 240). Hillmann draws parallels to other situations where merchants rose to become elites: Renaissance Florence, Tudor England. However, the reader is left with the sense that the particular criteria under consideration in Saint-Malo were so specific that they are unlikely to be found in other theaters of conflict.

Corsairs of Saint-Malo, which contains a comprehensive bibliography and an appendix of
tables, is published in Columbia University Press’s Middle Range Series. The series, which takes its name from sociologist Robert Merton’s work, features projects that explain “substantively important, intriguing phenomena and puzzles from the real world [which] span micro and macro levels of analysis, incorporate qualitative and quantitative data, and engage theory with richly textured empirics.” Hillmann’s work fulfills this remit admirably. However, in light of Merton’s own respect for the role that sailors played in the development of modern science and the economy, one might have hoped that they would appear more prominently in this volume.

Hillmann’s sources may not offer insights into how those who sailed as crew on these privateering vessels transitioned to other maritime ventures, but his analysis raises related questions: When they received their share of the profits from a captured prize ship, did they ever invest in future enterprises? How often did they sign on as crew for privateering ventures compared to the reliable but poorly compensated fishing voyages to the Grand Banks (*la pêche*)? Did the same “polyvalent” strategy shape the careers of common seamen, or was it a case that mariners accustomed to the *course* would be dissatisfied with commercial fishing? More broadly, what can we learn about the effects, financial or social, when privateering ventures failed or were captured themselves?

In *The Corsairs of Saint-Malo*, rather than attending to the logistics of wars Hillmann focuses on the economic disruption—and opportunity—they provide. This study offers a great deal to scholars of business economics as well as to historians looking for novel ways to understand the motivations behind commercial interactions. Through his network diagrams Hillmann presents a complex view of “the social fabric that held together the merchant community” and sheds new light on the links between maritime economy, war, and risk (p. 237).

Notes


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