

The Suppression of Piracy in the British Empire in the Eighteenth Century: Why did the Empire change its policy toward pirates?

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In 1718, Woodes Rogers, the new governor of the British Bahamas, began to act against piracy in the Atlantic world under the order of the King of England, George I and succeeded in his mission by 1721. This was the first time that the British Empire seriously addressed such an issue. This article discusses why official policy changed, by focusing on the interventions against the pirates around the Bahamas under Rogers.

In the late 17th century, many British firms engaging in trade in the Atlantic became wealthier because of the “commercial revolution”. As a result, they obtained more prestige and better connections with political circles in London. Piracy was a major obstacle to profitable trade in the Atlantic Ocean. Therefore, the traders sought to influence the government with the aim of eliminating the pirates.

At the same time, the British colonies in North America and in the West Indies also changed their policies toward pirates. Although colonies had cooperated with pirates in the 17th century, they started to help Britain to suppress piracy in the 18th century. The reasons can be found in the growing importance of the trans-Atlantic colonial trade due to the development of colonial plantations from the late 17th century.

The article concludes that the adoption of a new policy toward the pirates owed much to the changing characteristics of trade in the Atlantic. As trade links between Britain and its colonies intensified, the British government and colonial elites could unite in a common cause in suppressing piracy as the enemy of commerce.