From the early years of the Dutch Republic, the laws condemning and proscribing zeerooverij—piracy—were serious and manifold. The charter document of the five Admiralty colleges, drafted in 1597, explicitly forbade the crime.1 In 1611, the States-General promulgated a general proclamation “against the Pirates,” the first sweeping regulation treating the misdeed.2 Denouncing Dutch zeeroovers as “scum” and “rabble” who were “Enemies of the human race,” and whose “robbery [and] plundering” represented transgressions “against all the Law[s] of Nature and People,” the edict declared the authorities’ intention to “pursue, quell, punish, and demolish” those who committed such grievous acts. It also stated the government’s firm intention to discipline the perpetrators by threatening their lives and possessions, corrective measures that also awaited those who aided and abetted the scoundrels.3

Such prohibitions against the crime of piracy also appeared in formal peace agreements between the Republic and other states. In 1648, for instance, the States-General banned piracy and vowed to punish the crime strenuously; this time the law was enshrined in the Treaty of Münster which formally ended the Eighty Years War with Spain.4 Such firm sentiments were also manifested in mid-century treaties with Portugal (August 6, 1661),5 France (April 27, 1662),6 and England (September 14, 1662).7

Even at the local level, piracy received serious attention. Provincial laws devoted to the creation and preservation of public order, such as those promulgated in Zeeland in 1596 and 1607, excoriated the crime, grouping it with other offenses that the local authorities believed upset the smooth workings of civil society. Transgressors were threatened with interrogation under torture, branding, banishment, imprisonment, confiscation of possessions, and ultimately, execution.8 Even in the non-maritime provinces, such as Gelderland, such sentiments were evident; there, in 1621, the fear was of “river pirates” (stroomrovers) who would make their way up tributaries and wreak havoc on quiet inland towns.9

These measures were not all, of course. The Admiralties, too, formulated their own regulations, which were, in turn, usually supported by the provincial

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and national governing authorities. These injunctions were especially specific and firm when it came to the regulation of privateering. Generally speaking, Admiralty statutes—which were often mirrored in States-General proclamations—stipulated that privateers who violated their letters of commission were automatically considered *zeeroovers*. As a matter of course, privateers were forbidden to carry double commissions or to accept commissions from a foreign government. The Admiralties and government also warned privateers that if they did not return home to the Republic when summoned, their status as lawful *kapers* could suddenly change, and they would be considered pirates.

In sum, then, at every level—provincial, military, and confederal—the citizenry of the Dutch Republic were enjoined to refrain from that most notorious of maritime misdeeds, piracy. The language was admonishing and serious, and the promised punishments severe. Moreover, these proclamations did not represent mere rhetorical utterances expressed in some removed legislative chamber, but appeared in rather forceful, printed documents, which were disseminated throughout the city and towns of the Republic, posted and announced so that all could see and hear.

But was such a proliferation of laws against the crime really necessary? Indeed, the Dutch authorities had good reason to be concerned and upset. For while the laws discussed above were *preventive* measures aimed at averting the eruption of *zeerooverij* in the first place, other regulations and ordinances represented *reactive* legislation, manifestly acknowledging that throughout the Golden Age, many Dutch seamen fell into a life of piracy. Whether such actions represented something as ostensibly minor as the possession of fraudulent papers, or, on the other hand, the practice of savage maritime banditry, the effect was the same: the government deplored their seafarers’ descent into illicit maritime activity and vowed to punish it.

Probably one of the earliest laws of this type was an ordinance promulgated in 1583. This lengthy edict complained bitterly about Dutch “pirates” (*zeeroovers*) who were infesting the seas and preying upon residents of the fledging Republic as well as its friends and allies. These violent seamen—copious in number and armed and dangerous—were truly damaging, the ordinance avowed. They had “committed enormous abuses, excesses, [and] offenses” of an “evil” nature, harming the trade of good, upright commercial people. Consequently, it promised swift and severe retribution to these despicable lawbreakers, and outlined a strict set of measures aimed at creating a controlled privateering trade that could employ such aggressive and rapacious seamen in legitimate enterprise. It also invested particular institutions with the power to prosecute and regulate such predatory maritime activities.

A States-General mandate from 1607 represents another excellent example. The law angrily recognized the manifold “excesses” of Dutch privateers-gone-bad who had taken to preying on neutral states and the Republic’s allies. In a strong reproach, the States-General vowed to bring