

**‘A Sure Defence against the Foe?’  
Maritime Predation & British Commercial Policy  
during the Spanish American Wars of Independence,  
1810-1830**

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The Spanish American Wars of Independence in the early nineteenth century gave rise to an upsurge in maritime predation. In addition to the naval forces deployed by Spain and the Spanish American revolutionaries, privateers were commissioned by the belligerents to prey upon enemy commerce, while pirates also emerged to plunder the trade and shipping of all nations. The organizational and operational aspects of this upsurge in commerce-raiding activity have been the subject of a number of studies. Historians argue that prize-taking was carried out on the margins of legality by individuals who had little interest in Spanish American independence and were imbued with a money-hungry spirit.

The impact of maritime predation in the period 1810-1830 and the measures implemented by governments to protect their merchants have been marginalised in existing works. Notably absent from the literature is an understanding of Britain’s embroilment in the maritime prize war that accompanied the Spanish American Wars of Independence. Despite receiving little attention from historians, much importance was attached by contemporaries to predatory attacks on British vessels and property in this period, with newspapers and government correspondence being littered with reports and references to such incidents.

Such evidence is utilised in this study to investigate the British government’s response to commerce-raiding activity in the period 1810-1830 and to evaluate the effectiveness of the measures implemented to protect British traders. Given that this study adds a new dimension to the existing literature, a platform is provided from which to reassess the assertions of previous works with regard to the character of maritime predation and the motivations of the individuals who chose to deploy their capital and labour in prize-taking ventures. Moreover, the focus of this study on the relationship between the British government and British merchants sheds light on wider social, political and economic changes occurring in Britain in the early nineteenth century.