

## An interview with Mia J Rodriguez-Salgado

This interview with Mia J Rodriguez-Salgado (R-S) was carried out by Yorkshire Television (YTV) for the Channel 4 programme Elizabeth's Pirates. Mia J Rodriguez-Salgado is professor of international history at the London School of Economics.

### England's insignificance

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**YTV:** How significant was England on the world stage under Elizabeth I?

**R-S:** It was insignificant. No, that's a bit mean. England in 1558, when Elizabeth took over, is a power in decline.

It had, for a time with Henry VIII, looked like it would play a really important role in international politics. The most significant players in the international politics of the day were, in the west, France, Charles V and subsequently his son Philip II (it is difficult to give their kingdom a name – people refer to it as 'Spain', but this is a kind of generic name for what was a vast empire) and the Ottoman Turks in the east. So for a time it looked as if England would play a balancing role. Since France and Spain were so evenly matched, whoever England joined would then have the upper hand.

Henry VIII tried this and failed. England did not have the resources or the will to join the wars on the same level as did France and Spain. So for a while it was discredited, although it remained important in the massive struggle between these two powers. It was strategically important – everybody realised its strategic importance – but it was seen to be a country without good fighting men and with a useful but not particularly powerful navy.

Its greatest asset was its strategic location, not only

because the Channel was a major route but also because England was close to both France and the Low Countries, which were a crucial area for the Spanish Hapsburgs. But it didn't have the financial resources. It didn't have an army worth talking about, and its ships were too few to make a significant difference. So, by 1558, people think it is a useful ally but not a crucial one. You can afford to lose England; you can't afford to lose other allies. Perhaps even a small Italian state would be more valuable to you than England.

When there is a war going on between the French and what people refer to as the Spanish Hapsburgs – Charles V, Philip II and their successors – then England once again comes into its own. It becomes important, it becomes strategically vital perhaps, but if there is no war, then its importance recedes.

In 1559, France and Philip II make peace, so perhaps England's lack of importance at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign relates to that major strategic and political shift in international relations. But it is also due to the fact that its position in the war [against France] in 1557 and 1558 had been lamentable. The English had caused all kinds of trouble for Philip II [then married to Mary I and so king of England]. The soldiers had arrived late, weren't properly organised, didn't follow orders too well. The fleet, which he had hoped would make such a difference, went off to Alderney and had not done what he wanted, which was to back his attack

at Gravesline. So at the end of that war, England really did not enjoy a very good military reputation. It did not have a strategic value at that point, and therefore one could say it was a second- or even a third-class power at that juncture.

## Privateering

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**YTV:** Was privateering widespread?

**R-S:** Privateering was a major problem in the early modern world, not just in Europe, not just in the Mediterranean. It was also a major problem around the seas of Japan, China and so on.

No one was forced to opt for this mode of fighting. It was a choice, a choice made not only by individuals, by the backers of voyages, but also by governments. Governments could and very occasionally did try to stop privateering, but you had to have major political will and major military resources to do that. Most governments in the early modern world did not have either of these things and were not interested in entirely suppressing privateering.

Privateering had major benefits. It meant that private individuals both built and fitted out ships and made sure that they were fit for war. When early modern governments needed to go war, they had only a very small number of ships to call, if you like, royal navies. So how did they fight maritime wars? How did they even transport soldiers from one end of the globe to the other? They embargoed – seized – ships that happened to be around their coastline, and most of all, they seized the ships of their own people. So a privateer was a blessing whenever there was a war.

As a result, you allowed them a certain level of independence. You allowed them to get up to essentially criminal activities – because most of them weren't privateers, they were pirates – because you could benefit both from their ships and from their training, from the fact that they had crews that were ready-made fighting units.

Privateering also meant that some people focused their energy and their violence outside the kingdom, and that, too, was very beneficial to Elizabeth. A lot of these people really would have been quite dangerous to her at home. Much better to encourage them – indeed, at times to even give them some money – and let them go and attack someone else.

And finally, of course, she liked to strike at her enemies indirectly and at minimal cost. By encouraging privateering, she ensured that her enemies were weakened, but she could repudiate the privateers and indeed she sometimes did – she could claim they were simply acting off their own bat and she had not licensed them. Frequently the privateers took with them two sets of documentation, one licensing them to do something and another telling them not to do it. Elizabeth would then

use whichever set of orders suited her best the moment these people came home with the loot.

And she very skilfully manipulated the grey area that was privateering in order to weaken her enemies, to get additional resources for herself and to get this violent, really uncontrollable element of English manhood out of home waters as much as she could and make her money and cause trouble elsewhere.

**YTV:** Was privateering on the increase?

**R-S:** During the 1560s, there is a major intensification of privateering in the Channel, but this is largely to do with French privateering rather than English. What we have is a decline in law and order in France, which gives way to a great deal of piracy rather than privateering in the Channel. The English often work with these Frenchmen and often join in. Why? Because the Channel is a wonderful resource. It's a major shipping route and you have very rich cargoes going to and fro. It matters to Philip greatly because what is affected is the shipping – in fact, the Channel is the easiest route between his two major territories, Spain in the south and the Low Countries in the north.

What is very interesting is that the privateering in the '60s eventually destroys the trade routes between Spain to the Low Countries. It is the Spanish who get picked on by both French and English, to the extent that it leads to the collapse of the maritime insurance system. What happens then is that Spain has to rely on ships from the Low Countries, from France and, indeed, from England to bring goods to and to take goods away from Spain. So it is a major problem but it is not one that Philip identifies solely or even primarily with England.

## Sir Francis Drake

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**YTV:** Can you put Drake and Raleigh into their historical context?

**R-S:** The 16th century produced a great number of adventurers, people who were considered heroes in their own country and enemies by their opponents, who were enormously colourful figures, who struck a chord and became popular heroes or popular villains across a number of countries.

Drake and Raleigh are two of these, but they are by no means alone. There were some Frenchmen and even some Spaniards and, above all, Muslims who had very similar roles within popular literature and also within the political structures of the day. These are figures who transcend popular myth and literature and who go right through to becoming major political figures, both in their own right and as part of the international scene.

**YTV:** Why did Drake set sail on his circumnavigation in 1577 in secrecy?

**R-S:** Drake clearly had insider information. He was going

to attempt something that had not been done before and it was vital to keep it as secret as possible. Of course, it should not have been allowed at all. Spain and England were at peace, they were allies. In letters exchanged by Philip and Elizabeth, they each signed themselves 'Your perpetual ally', 'Your dear sister', 'Your dear brother'. This, of course, was the language of diplomacy, but it was also a reflection of a state of peace.

So Elizabeth should not have allowed Drake to go. But then Elizabeth very frequently broke international law, and this was part of her attempt to undermine the Spanish empire without getting herself involved in a war.

She habitually supported pirates and privateers, and the worst that she was getting as a result were occasional protests, sometimes very angry letters from Philip II, basically telling her to get her lads under control. And Elizabeth, who was a wonderful actress, would play this for all it was worth – 'I'm just a woman. I simply cannot control these military men. I would love to help. I would love to establish control and order, but you know what it's like for a poor woman like me ...' And in a sense, she was right: these men had a habit of not obeying her orders. Drake would prove consequently that he had no qualms about disobeying straight orders from the queen, as indeed would other privateers and other adventurers.

The circumnavigation makes an awful lot of difference as far as Drake's image in Spain is concerned. This was, first of all, a staggering feat of navigation, we mustn't forget that, and the Spanish are the first ones to value the significance of what he did. They are also the first ones to realise the implications of that voyage – because they had never had a threat from that weak underbelly. The Pacific had not been sailed before, so while they had been able to set up reasonable measures of defence for the Atlantic, that was not the case in the Pacific. With the circumnavigation, they realised that they had a massive problem of defence to deal with now.

Drake was linked with French pirates – they seldom acted alone. The circumnavigation is not heroic Englishmen managing to do what no one else had done. Drake is acting with a much more experienced set of French pirates, and he also linked up with *cimarrones*, escaped slaves. As a result, there was a threat to the Spanish empire.

So it is a combination of the skill of navigation and the threat that the round-the-world voyage represented that makes Drake really take centre stage for the Spaniards. After this, they are, in fact, almost obsessed with what other voyages he might undertake.

They were certainly afraid of what he could do. If he had repeated that feat of navigation, that would have convinced them of the threat he represented. It is after this that they constantly want reports about what he is doing, about where his next voyage is likely to be. Of

course, he follows this up with a whole series of feats against the Spaniards, which raise him to the status of arch-villain, the figure that, if you like, encapsulates everything that is loathsome about those out-of-control English mariners out there.

After the circumnavigation, what Elizabeth should have done is cut off Drake's head, instead of which, as one Spaniard bitterly observed, the sword that should have cut off his head was used to knight him. This was a remarkable move on Elizabeth's part, and she would not have done it had it not been for the success of the voyage. Drake had managed to strike the Spaniards where there was no defence and had come back with massive booty.

He gets away with it, not simply because Elizabeth decides to knight him, but because the Spaniards decide that this is no time to pick a fight with England. They decide to make some representations, to complain about what Drake had done. Subsequently they leave it as though it were matter for the private investors who had lost money or people who had lost their goods as a result of the attack, for them to negotiate with the English government and with Drake himself for some sort of compensation.

The reason the circumnavigation doesn't lead to a war is that Philip II decides this it is not a good time to press it. But Elizabeth thinks she's got away with it and Drake thinks he's got away with it, and it gives an enormous boost to other privateers and pirates to go out there and try their fortune.

**YTV:** What does the episode of Drake's capture of the *Rosario* at the time of the Armada tell us about his character?

**R-S:** Drake is a man who would follow his own nose and his own interests over and above those of the queen and, indeed, as in this case, the country. That isn't to say that he wasn't a patriot. It's just that he is an adventurer with a clear idea of what his best interests are and he follows them. At this stage of his career, we are dealing with a man who is enormously self-confident, who thinks he can get away with quite a lot because he has benefited the queen. He has done very daring deeds and he can get away with it.

You see him the following year, in 1589, again disobeying the queen's orders, doing exactly what he and his major investors want him to do. So I think the looting of the *Rosario* is entirely in character for a man who is very frequently on the wrong side of the law. You must remember: this is what he does and what he does brilliantly.

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## Sir Walter Raleigh

**YTV:** Was Raleigh serious in offering to become Philip's agent in 1587?

**R-S:** It was quite habitual for these particular figures who are curious hybrids – part pirate, part privateer, part royal commander – to negotiate with the enemy. Hawkins does it – why not Raleigh? The major figure in the Ottoman fleet does it – why shouldn't someone else? These men were essentially people who made or tried to make their own laws. So there would be nothing unusual about Raleigh negotiating with the enemy and it is quite possible that he did.

Of course, in all of these negotiations, these people are playing a double game. They do keep their government or monarch informed, and they say they are doing it to string the other side along. Maybe they were. And maybe they were just testing the waters and seeing if there was a better deal there. And like a lot of us do these days, why not just put in an application for another post and see whether that doesn't just raise your value within the current organisation. It's good strategy.

**YTV:** What does Raleigh's involvement in the massacre at Smerwick tell us about his character? [At Smerwick in Ireland in 1580, English troops massacred 600 Spanish and Italian soldiers sent by the pope during the Desmond revolt.]

**R-S:** This is quite normal by the standards of the time. When you have an invasion of an area that you are scarcely in control of and where your resources are limited, this is frequently where, in the early modern period, you get massacres of this kind. It was dreadful, it was condemned in its own day, but it was also something that happened elsewhere.

It doesn't mean that these individuals are more blood-thirsty or nastier than their fellows. It is just that, in that situation, they decide that a massacre is going to be the safest way. It is very similar, for example, to the situation in Florida when Philip II sends his navy to destroy the colony that the

Huguenots tried to establish. You cannot afford to be

soft in areas where you do not have firm control and major military forces.

**YTV:** Why was Raleigh taken in by the myth of El Dorado?

**R-S:** Adventurers were a curious mixture of dreamers and hard-headed businessmen, and this was a world where the extraordinary happened. Nobody knew there was another continent, never mind one with gold mines and silver mines, and it happened to be peopled by races that could be easily dominated by these Europeans. If it had happened once, why shouldn't it happen again? So both they and their backers were willing to take enormous risks because, if they were the ones to strike lucky, the rewards were staggering.

All of these figures have a streak of daredevil in them that you can say is mad. If they had had a streak of religion in them, you would have called it either bigotry or genuinely important spirituality. All of them are just bigger than life. If it wasn't for that element of risk-taking, which can be described as sheer lunacy at times, they wouldn't have done what they did. So you can describe it as madness, you can describe it as vision – it depends on whether you are successful or not on how history decides to describe it.

You can't say that they were either thugs or heroes. They were both. That's what made them interesting and remarkable men and that's what made them successful in their own time. These are men who switch hats and switch roles. They are sometimes pirates; they are sometimes working with the queen's blessing and following her orders. But the roles they take follow a different pattern depending on the times, on the situation. You cannot say they are one thing or another. You simply have to accept that it was their ability to change from being criminals to being ostensibly the most loyal and respectful subjects of her majesty that made them so remarkable in their day and so successful. So you can't have your black and white division.