

Hans Kirk

The Slave

O, holy mother of God,
let our enemies die,
and give us a successful voyage
across the salty sea.

Old Spanish seaman's song.

Translated and with an Introduction by

Marc Linder

**Fānpihuà Press
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Introduction

The conclusion is inescapable that the gold and silver which the men on the treasure ships brought to Spain and which, if they were imbued with the prevailing mercantilist philosophy, they imagined were going to enrich the motherland after the fashion of King Midas, merely served to impoverish the working-classes and provide windfalls for the trading-classes. . . . The gold and silver of the Indies . . . precipitated a price revolution in all Christendom, and in most countries the lag of wages behind prices bestowed even greater windfalls upon the rising bourgeoisie than in Andalusia. This augmentation of profits was probably the greatest single factor in the rise of modern capitalism.¹

Hans Kirk, who lived from 1898 to 1962, was one of Denmark's leading novelists during the quarter-century beginning with the publication in 1928 of *The Fishermen*, which has become the best-selling Danish novel of all time.² Always a politically engaged author, Kirk mastered several fictional genres, including short stories and novellas; in addition he turned out thousands of journalistic pieces.

Kirk wrote the manuscript to *The Slave* in 1941-42 while incarcerated in a prison in Copenhagen and at Horserød, a World War I-era detention camp north of the capital. Immediately after the German occupation of Denmark on April 9, 1940, the Danish police placed at the Gestapo's disposal a special registry of Communists it had collected listing Kirk as chairman of the Danish Communist Party's literature group. He was among the first Communists arrested by the Danish police on June 22, 1941—the day Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union—in response to demands by the Gestapo.³

¹Earl Hamilton, "Wages and Subsistence on Spanish Treasure Ships, 1503-1660," 37 *Journal of Political Economy* 430-50 at 450 (1929).

²Hans Kirk, *The Fishermen* (Marc Linder trans.; 2d ed; Iowa City: Fänpihuà, 2000 [1999]).

³Børge Houmann, "Om baggrunden for disse breve og deres udgivelse," in Hans Kirk, *Breve fra Horserød* 7-16 at 8 (Børge Houmann ed.; n.p.: Sirius,

The Germans, Kirk joked later, had been “so friendly as to burn” the manuscript of this “picaresque and exciting history of a treasure ship”⁴ after his escape from Horserød on August 29, 1943. The impact of incarceration on Kirk is manifest in the use that his allegory about power makes of a seventeenth-century Spanish colonial backdrop to illuminate questions of accommodation of and resistance to Nazi subjugation.⁵

According to Kirk’s own account, he and his fellow prisoners faced a “desperate situation” in late 1941 and early 1942: “We had to ask ourselves the question whether it was necessary to capitulate to Nazism, which Social Democracy at that time was prepared to do. The book was meant as a kind of answer to this question.” Three years after the war Kirk decided to write the book all over again—despite the “tremendous difficulty” that he and most writers experienced resuming work on a book that they had already believed finished—because he felt that that question was still topical.⁶

While Nazi conquest of Europe formed the motive for writing *The Slave*, Kirk happened on the material for the plot serendipitously. In an interview with the Communist Party newspaper two weeks before the novel appeared in 1948, Kirk observed that “it was by pure coincidence that I found an article about the sub-

1967).

⁴Johannes Weltzer, “Hans Kirk—en Digter midt i Hverdagen,” *Information*, July 5, 1945, at 5, at 6, col. 2. According to one of Kirk’s friends, comrades had buried his manuscript under the barracks, but it had been removed by the time Kirk came to get it after liberation. Kirk, *Breve fra Horserød* at 39.

⁵In this sense, one reviewer’s criticism that “many of the novel’s ideological conversations torpedo the framework. 17th-century Spain disappears, once again we’re in Vestre Fængsel,” missed the point. Niels Kaas Johansen, “Den farlige tendens,” *Information*, Nov. 10, 1948, at 4, col. 1, 4.

⁶Eric [Danielsen], “Mennesket må selv gribe ind i sin tilværelse,” *Land og Folk*, Sept. 26, 1948, at 9, col. 1. A social-democratic reviewer disagreed vehemently, arguing that while in a pinch one could understand that a novel written during the Nazi occupation could teach a “gospel of hate,” publishing it three years after the war without revisions was “trist.” F[rederik]. N[ielsen]., “Herba diaboli,” *Social-Demokraten*, Nov. 20, 1948, at 7, col. 4.

ject in an American journal, and afterwards I investigated it more closely.”⁷ He had time to do research in prison, and a librarian helped him obtain books from the Royal Library in Copenhagen including four books in German and English about the Antilles published in the middle of the seventeenth century. (Indeed, Kirk complained to the Justice Minister that the prison administration, which was responsible for returning the books to the Royal Library, had refused to give him a receipt confirming that he had handed them over; he observed that, given his economic circumstances, he would not be able to satisfy any financial demands made by the library in case these rare and expensive books were lost.)⁸ The novel, according to Kirk, was “based on an authentic event” in 1679 concerning a three-masted Spanish ship, “one of the world’s richest gold ships . . . on the way from the Spanish possessions in South America to Barcelona.”⁹

Nevertheless, *The Slave* was not intended as an historically accurate portrayal of the seventeenth-century event itself.¹⁰ In-

⁷Eric, “Mennesket må selv gribe ind i sin tilværelse” at 9, col. 1.

⁸Kirk, *Breve fra Horserød* at 36-38 (letter of November 2, 1941).

⁹Eric, “Mennesket må selv gribe ind i sin tilværelse” at 9, col. 1. For a report—a Danish translation of excerpts from the article amounting to an outline of the book’s plot—that Kirk sent to the librarian in 1941, see Bo Elbrønd-Bek, “Breve fra Hans Kirk vedrørende ‘Slaven,’” *Danske studier* 111-24 at 116-17 (1983). Extensive searches of periodicals indexes failed to identify the article. Nor does the leading monograph on shipwrecks in the Western Hemisphere mention a Spanish gold ship from 1679. Robert F. Marx, *Shipwrecks of the Western Hemisphere, 1492-1825* (New York: World, 1971). Morten Thing, Kirk’s biographer, confirmed that no one has verified the existence of this article. Email from Morten Thing to Marc Linder (May 26, 2000).

¹⁰Bo Elbrønd-Bek, “At sejle er nødvendigt: Ikke at leve—et essay om Hans Kirks roman *Slaven*,” in *Bag ved bøgernes bjerg: En hilsen til Mogens Iversen* 191-213 at 193 (Copenhagen: Danmarks Biblioteksskole, 1978). One example of deviation from the historically representative is the portrayal of the ship as sailing alone, whereas in fact Spanish ships carrying large quantities of bullion (which by the late seventeenth century was overwhelmingly silver rather than gold) sailed in large, state-bureaucratically organized, convoyed treasure fleets for protection against pirates. Clarence Haring, *Trade and Navigation Between Spain and the Indies in the Time of the Hapsburgs* (1918). The abominable hygienic conditions, even for wealthy passengers, were much

deed, Kirk's presentist orientation was reinforced by the practicalities of reconstructing the lost manuscript at a time when he was fully involved in post-World War II Communist Party politics and presumably lacked the time to duplicate all the research he had done while in prison. In an interview with him, *Land og Folk*, Kirk's own Communist Party newspaper, correctly noted that "no one seriously believes that Kirk buried himself in historical material if it wasn't at the same time to say something about the present, on which in contrast to so many other authors he has taken a clear and unambiguous position."¹¹

Hans Scherfig, another outstanding left-wing Danish novelist, called *The Slave* "the weightiest literary work of the occupation period."¹² And a reviewer in the Communist Party newspaper went so far as to assert: "If the Germans had not been so thorough in burning the manuscript . . . *The Slave* could have appeared illegally in 1943 and become the Danish resistance's most powerful document and the resistance struggle's strongest literary spur."¹³

Kirk, a talented story teller, embedded his political-moral meditation on power in a plot thick with what an early reviewer called the "features of a bloody and violent sensational film."¹⁴ The full spectrum of class hierarchy is represented on this ship of fools: high-ranking Spanish colonial administrative, military, and judicial officials, a catholic inquisitor, aristocratic estate and slave owners, an immensely rich female capitalist, and an English puritan merchant-capitalist populate the upper-class deck,

worse than the novel suggests. Carla Phillips, *Six Galleons for the King of Spain: Imperial Defense in the Early Seventeenth Century 152-80* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

¹¹Eric, "Mennesket må selv gribe ind i sin tilværelse" at 9, col. 1.

¹²Hans Scherfig, "Minde om Hans Kirk," in Hans Scherfig, *Tre Digtere* 49-65 at 55 (N.p.: Sirius, 1963).

¹³Sven Møller Kristensen, "Det ukuelige sind," *Land og Folk*, Nov. 14, 1948, at 7, col. 1.

¹⁴Hans Brix, "Men han kan da skrive," *Berlingske Aftenavis*, Nov. 10, 1948, at 4.

while the lower-class deck houses sailors, cannoneers, and Indian and black slaves. Kirk, as novelist and poet Tom Kristensen observed, succeeds in “deftly dissecting” these ideological social types and “numbering their bones with amusing Marxist numerals. . . .”¹⁵

Kirk considered *The Slave* his best book: “I have in any event written one readable book—*The Slave*—the rest you can sweep off the table.”¹⁶ Within four years of its appearance, *The Slave* had been translated into six languages—Norwegian, Swedish, German, Dutch, Polish, and Icelandic—and came out a few years later in Hungarian and Slovak as well. After more than half a century, the book remains in print in Denmark’s leading paperback classical literature imprint.¹⁷

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¹⁵Tom Kristensen, “Hans Kirks nye roman,” *Politiken*, Nov. 10, 1948, at 8, col. 1, 2.

¹⁶Bris, “Vi har jo den halve verden bag os!” *Information*, Dec. 19, 1953, at 3, col. 3 at 6.

¹⁷Morten Thing, *Hans Kirks mange ansigter: En biografi 377-78* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1997).

Acknowledgments

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Cast of Characters

(in order of appearance)

Juan Gomez—soldier retiring to Spain
Pablillo—overseer
Count Guilemo Castillon—old estate owner
Don Pedro de Carajaval—viceroy
Don Jesus—inquisitor
Doña Inez Escobedo—wealthy capitalist
José Nuñez—mate
Pablo Avarano—intellectual and colonial scribe
Mariello Corridan—noseless soldier retiring to Spain
Indian slave girl owned by don Luis de Zuniga
Pancuiaco—Indian slave owned by doña Inez
Don Vargas—Jesuit priest
Don Francisco de Elinaz—*oidor* (judge)
Don Luis de Zuniga—officer and nobleman
Samuel Rayburn—English merchant
Colonel Juan Gonzales—army officer
Chaparrito—boatswain
Alberto—old sailor
Christobal—mulatto sailor
Portuguese sailor
Fray Ramon—Dominican teacher at Mexican university
Captain van Laahr
Don Guilemo's Negro slave
Old sailor

