

A forceful reminder of the plight of seafarers and immigrants

The Death Ship by Ret Marut/B. Traven

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Sadly, these days B. Traven and his many novels have been assigned to relative obscurity in the world of literature and politics. Traven was but one of the many aliases used by this mysterious author, adventurer and revolutionary. Many historians have tried to uncover the secret behind Traven's identity, some suggesting he was the illegitimate son of Kaiser Wilhelm II, others that he was a theology student from Cincinnati in the US. Whatever his precise origins, Traven always shunned publicity, preferring to let his novels be judged by the ideas contained within.

Traven's wish for privacy and anonymity can be witnessed by the number of names he adopted to conceal his identity. Over the years these included Ret Marut, Traven Torsvan and Hal Croves. Our interest in Traven begins with his earliest proven incarnation as Ret Marut, an aspiring German actor who later became involved in anarchist politics and edited an anarchist/pacifist magazine *Der Ziegelbrenner* (The Brick Burner).

Marut actively participated in the insurgent Bavarian Republic in 1919—the revolutionary government of soldiers and workers deputies in Munich—and became chief censor of the bourgeois press. He was active in the Bavarian capital, Munich and narrowly escaped execution when the nascent fascist *Freikorps* and army troops mobilised by the Germany's Social Democrat Party government crushed the revolutionary movement.

Understandably, Marut went underground during the counter-revolutionary suppression, a period which saw the summary execution of an estimated 700 men and women. Marut later resurfaced in Chiapas, Mexico in the early 1920s where, using the name Traven, he wrote a number of novels and short stories, including *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*, later filmed in 1948 by US director John Huston.

The Death Ship, his first novel, however, is in my opinion his greatest work. It is the story of a horrendous chain of events that befall the appropriately named Gerard Gales, an American sailor, in immediate aftermath of World War I.

Gales loses his identity, humanity and right to existence when his ship sets sail without him from Antwerp, Belgium with his sailor's identity card and passport still on board the ship in his jacket pocket. Stranded on foreign shores, Gales is systematically persecuted by the authorities of various European countries that he has no desire to be in. He is frequently jailed, deported and even sentenced to death, simply for the crime of being a worker without papers. Needless to say, Gales is treated with respect by his fellow workers, who willingly share the little they have with him.

Bereft of a sailor's card, Gales cannot secure any shipboard work and make it back home to New Orleans. To further complicate matters, the American consulate refuses to supply him with the necessary papers because he has no proof of identity. While Gales' travails with bureaucracy and his attempts to prove his American citizenship assume truly Kafkaesque proportions, obsequious officials provide wealthy travellers the necessary documents within minutes.

Desperate to escape his precarious situation, Gales reluctantly accepts a job shovelling coal on the *Yorikke*, an ancient rusting hulk that is running guns. Gales' crewmates are all in the same unfortunate position, unable to secure passage on a decent ship with union conditions. The *Yorikke* is truly a death ship with a torturous and unsustainable regime. The captain murders some sailors, others jump overboard, unable to keep pace with the hellish amount of work. Not much can be said for the health and safety conditions, with crew members

frequently burning themselves in the antiquated steam room. The swill doled out to the hapless and perennially hungry sailors is so bad that the ship's rats won't even touch it.

Some critics have dismissed *The Death Ship* and Traven's body of work as being hopelessly dated and idealistic because he makes explicit attacks on the dehumanising aspects of capitalism and the unfettered greed it produces. Indeed, the last few decades have seen popular literature retreat into general misanthropy or even worse, the glossolalia of post modernism. These days novels that articulate the premise that positive change from below is possible are rare indeed. Traven was cut from different cloth. While Gales and his fellow workers often face insurmountable odds, they fight back using solidarity and mutual aid, the only weapons they have.

While *The Death Ship* is a truly terrifying book to read, it is also full of astonishingly inventive black humor. There are also numerous references to the Industrial Workers of the World and the 1917 Russian Revolution, indicating the revolutionary period in which it was written.

Above all, *The Death Ship* serves to remind contemporary readers of the plight of seafarers, particularly those from the under-developed or ex-colonial countries employed on modern day death ships—vessels registered under “flags of convenience” so ship owners can circumvent environmental, health and safety and pay conditions hard fought for by previous generations of sailors.

Likewise, comparisons can be drawn between the protagonists in Traven's *The Death Ship* and the millions of refugees and asylum seekers wishing free movement across borders worldwide. Little has changed when one compares the imprisonment of Gales for being an illegal alien in the 1920s and the response of Australia and other developed capitalist countries, where refugees—men, women and children—are held in prison camps simply for the crime of arriving without the necessary documentation.



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