1 THE GENESIS OF REBELLION

1.1 Introduction

This book is a study of social order and rebellion in the Royal Navy in the period between 1740 and 1820. There have been previous scholarly books on naval mutiny, but for the most part they are disappointing. Although mutiny has long been regarded as a metaphor for social revolution, it usually has been treated on a case-by-case basis. Scholars have never systematically compared ships that experienced mutinies to those that did not.[1] This inattention to comparison makes dramatic sense, for each mutiny is unique and its story can be told by focusing on the nature of the Captain's leadership, the heroic – or dastardly – character of the ringleaders, and the loyalty of those seamen who resisted the mutineers. Yet this case study research strategy can shed little light on the nature of mutiny and, in particular, on the general circumstances that are likely to make it more probable.

A second family of studies compares the common features of naval rebellion across a range of mutinies. Since these studies are limited to instances in which mutiny occurred, however, they cannot determine what made these ships different from others that did not experience mutiny. Although comparative studies of mutinies can be insightful and well informed, they are unable to make causal claims.[2] As purely descriptive natural histories of mutiny, they cannot analyze their genesis.[3]

Because we regard mutiny as *rebellion* – that is, as an important instance of high-risk collective action – this book adopts an alternative form of analysis, one that combines systematic comparison of ships that experienced mutiny and those that did not with in-depth case studies of dozens of mutinies that allow us to make generalizations across different occurrences.

1.1.1 Revisiting the Mutiny on the *Bounty*

There is no mutiny more famous than the one that took place onboard HMS *Bounty* in April 1789. As an incident of British imperial or naval history, the mutiny on the *Bounty* is of trivial importance. What is important about the case is that, then and now, it has captured the popular imagination. Thanks to a host of books and several feature films, mutiny has become practically synonymous with the story of that ship.[4] More important for the questions that drive this book, however, the *Bounty* seems to encapsulate much about how we understand the genesis of rebellion.

In the wake of his misadventures in the South Seas, William Bligh, commanding Lieutenant of HMS *Bounty*, published an account of the mutiny. Bligh paused in his narrative to note that "It will very naturally be asked, what could be the reason for such a revolt?" He blamed it all on a conspiracy led by Fletcher Christian, a vain and unsteady junior officer, and comprised of seamen besotted by "female connexions" that they made on Tahiti. The mutineers had "flattered themselves with the hopes of a more happy life among the Otaheiteans, than they could possibly enjoy in England." Bligh argued that the revolt was facilitated by opportunities for rebellion that the mutineers had exploited: to wit, that the ship was isolated and his command included no Marines who could have come to his aid. Even so, given that mutiny was a capital offense, his readers no doubt assumed that his subordinates were driven by the strongest of grievances. But Bligh was at pains to assure them otherwise: "Had their mutiny been occasioned by any grievances, either real or imaginary, I must have discovered symptoms of their discontent."[5]

Bligh's critics, including some of the men subsequently captured and tried for the mutiny and backed by influential supporters, painted a different story. They claimed that the crew had been pushed

to rebel by the injustice and deprivation that prevailed aboard the small ship. Bligh had shown little sympathy for the crew during a trying outward voyage that featured a fruitless, month-long effort to round Cape Horn in the teeth of severe winter storms. Having given up on that quicker but more perilous route, the ship then sailed eastward around Africa, reaching Tahiti only after a voyage that lasted more than ten months. Through it all, Bligh was said to be an erratic and overbearing commander. His frugal economizing deprived his men of adequate food and water even as he fiercely guarded his own petty privileges. Witnesses testified that Bligh relied on bullying and flogging to maintain shipboard order. Bligh's irascibility led him to demote his Sailing Master, John Fryer, replacing him with Fletcher Christian, who, in turn, later suffered Bligh's disfavor and became the chief ringleader of the mutiny.

These accounts portrayed the mutiny as being made by men who had reached the breaking point. Yet Bligh had patrons and supporters of his own: they contended that Bligh had been betrayed by weak and ungrateful subordinates. He and a handful of loyal seamen had returned to England thanks to an intrepid feat of survival and seamanship that included a harrowing passage of more than three thousand miles in an open launch. Having suffered betrayal and rebellion and lived to tell of it, some saw Bligh as a national hero. So was he a naval hero or a petty tyrant who drove his men to desperation? Two centuries later, neither depiction is especially convincing.[6]

The accusations lodged by Bligh's foes have resonated with audiences then and now because they match the conventional understanding of rebellion. The idea that rebellion occurs because suffering people are pushed to rebel when tyranny and oppression are severe and other ways out are blocked is widespread.[7] Injustice and deprivation are treated as causes of all manner of rebellion, ranging in scale from strikes and prison riots to revolutions and civil wars.[8]

One important elaboration of this idea is that rebellion is driven by relative deprivation. When people expect things to be getting better and they do not, or when the members of some important reference group are faring better than they are, frustration builds and can be channeled into aggression. Sometimes this occurs after sustained periods of improving conditions are followed by a downturn. It need not be the case that material conditions have actually worsened much or fallen to levels below

those that previously had been endured peacefully. On the contrary, rebellion occurs because rising expectations have been thwarted. De Tocqueville noticed this in the coming of the French Revolution and it has been observed in other periods of rebellion as well.[9]

By contrast, Bligh's account of the mutiny on the *Bounty* has something that has more in common with the revisionist explanations of rebellion that took hold in the 1970s. Bligh blamed private incentives (the attractions of Tahiti), elite divisions (a rift between the officers) and favorable opportunities (the ship lacked Marines, it was alone in the South Seas, and so on) for the outbreak of rebellion on his ship. Prevailing theories of collective action similarly emphasize private incentives in motivating collective action.[10] The resource mobilization school of social movements discounts the causal role of grievances altogether, regarding political opportunities and resources instead as the key factors responsible for generating collective protest.[11]

In writing this book we sought to move beyond both the Bligh-like understanding of rebellion as a product of personal incentives, resources and opportunities, as well as the view that inequality and material deprivation are primary drivers of rebellion. What is at stake in the mutiny on the *Bounty* and the dozens of other mutinies that we will analyze, is less the personalities of a commander and his antagonists than the quality of governance. When seamen regard the governance of the ship as incompetent, reckless or heedless of their welfare, they are more likely to rebel. Every mutiny contains dramatic narrative details and takes place in the unique social ecology of a sailing ship. This alone makes the study of naval insurrection fascinating, but understanding mutiny sheds light on the general class of events known as rebellion.

1.2 What Is Mutiny?

The Royal Navy characterized mutiny broadly and imprecisely, variously defining it in the Articles of War as any form of individual or collective defiance of command, or any communication or planning to that effect.[12] What today we would consider to be relatively minor acts of defiance or refusal of duty could be construed as mutiny in the Articles of War. At one extreme, Captain Thomas Troubridge, known for the mutiny on HMS *Culloden*, declared, "Whenever I see a fellow

look as if he was thinking, I say that is mutiny."[13] We are not interested in individual acts of insubordination, however broadly commanders defined it. Mutinies are classic examples of collective action. Collective action describes situations in which groups of people have to decide whether to undertake costly action that they believe would improve their shared situation. When collective action takes the form of rebellion against the state, the potential costs are especially high.

Our particular concern is with those mutinies that took the form of a *collective insurrection against the constituted order of a ship*.[14] We narrow our focus to mutinies that passed beyond the mere planning stage, in which the crewmen seized their ship or halted its operations by acting collectively. In some mutinies, the ringleaders sought to escape from naval service, whereas in others they wanted to compel their commanders or other naval authorities to redress their grievances. This book analyzes both types of mutiny.[15]

Full-fledged mutinies of this kind were rare (and dangerous) events, but they happened with enough frequency to have been a part of the shared experience of the sailing navy and its institutional ecology. Between 1756 and 1806, more than five hundred cases of mutiny (not including those of striking a superior officer) were tried by naval courts-martial, resulting in nearly four hundred convictions.[16] Most of these mutinies did not rise to the level of taking a ship or halting its operations – the forms that we shall study – but collective insubordination was a continual threat that concerned naval legal institutions and had a considerable influence on governance. The threat of mutiny influenced relations between seamen and officers, how commanders ran their ships and ultimately became an important impetus to legal and administrative reforms.

Studying mutiny in the Royal Navy enables us to understand the roles of governance, on the one hand, and grievances, on the other, in accounting for rebellion. The thorough record-keeping of the Navy makes it possible to track ships and their crews over time. This allows us to study scores of rebellions occurring in the same institutional setting in which practices and expectations about good governance were understood by seamen and officers alike.

At first glance, one would expect that seamen's grievances would be of little help in explaining mutiny. After all, it is widely understood that conditions in the Royal Navy were brutal. Sailors and

Marines in the Navy were subject to harsh conditions – as Samuel Johnson famously described their lot:

> No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into jail; for being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned . . . A ship is worse than a jail. There is, in a jail, better air, better company, better conveniency of every kind; and a ship has the additional disadvantage of being in danger.[17]

If grievances were so ubiquitous, as Dr. Johnson colorfully suggests, why did most ships never face an insurrection and why did most seamen never take part in a mutiny?

Dr. Johnson, a man with no maritime experience, certainly exaggerated. Even so, conditions onboard naval ships were notoriously hard. A standard battleship of seventy-four guns was only about a hundred and sixty feet in length but bore up to five hundred men. This resulted in crowding, privation and a substantial risk of accident and disease. The officers were the lords of the ship and many infractions were punishable by flogging or, more casually, by a blow from a knotted rope or cane (this was known as "starting"). The quality and supply of food and drink often deteriorated during long voyages. Many seamen died of illnesses and shipwrecks. Seamen's pay was poor and its general rates had been set in the middle of the seventeenth century. Their liberties were routinely negated. For instance, commanders frequently denied seamen customary shore leave for fear that they would abscond. During wartime, the Navy relied on impressments to fill the ranks, and terms of service were indefinite.

Grievances can be causes of rebellion when they are severe and when they can be readily attributed to bad governance. Nevertheless, seamen did not regard *routine* hardship as grounds for mutiny. Eighteenth-century laboring people in England operated under different sets of expectations about their standards of living than do their modern counterparts. What were the relevant considerations? In some ways, conditions on merchant ships were harder than on naval ships. Most types of working people ashore were also poorly paid and faced coercive labor discipline. What seamen did seem to expect was that their commanders would maintain their safety, attend to their welfare, observe maritime occupational norms and rule in a predictable fashion. Incidents that threatened their safety and welfare, and indifferent or inappropriate responses to these

threats, could stir unrest. In making Captains the supreme authorities on ships, the Navy also gave them responsibility for such failures. This made it easy for seamen to attribute blame to commanders for incidents that harmed or threatened them, regardless of the facts of the matter.

Mutiny tells us much about threats to social order and the exercise of command. Yet it not only reveals failures of social order, but also how shipboard cooperation is attained. The social order of a ship depended on cooperation between officers and men and between seamen of different skills and ranks. The scale of the Royal Navy in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is impressive. In the Napoleonic era, the Navy employed more than a hundred thousand men. It was the western world's largest industrial unit, and among the most expensive and administratively demanding enterprises on the planet. Its warships were the technological marvels of the age. Attaining social order in so large and complex an enterprise was no small feat.

Inspired by now-classic explorations of social order at sea, our study explains how order was attained in the Navy and why it sometimes broke down.[18] In addition to correcting many misperceptions about mutiny that traditional approaches have fostered, our book stands solidly in the tradition of historical studies of social order and collective action.[19] It explores why people commit to participate in dangerous collective action, exploring the roles of grievances, coordination, leadership and dynamic mobilization processes. In this, it breaks with much of the literature on contentious politics, which focuses heavily on political opportunities.[20] We also differ from the micro-mobilization perspective adopted by many recent studies of rebellion that puts the emphasis on ideology and transformative experiences.[21] In analyzing the mass mutinies of 1797, our study takes on the arguments made by historians that the diffusion of revolutionary ideologies was the cause of rebellion by seamen, and the claims made by political scientists concerning the dynamic interactions between rebels and regimes that define armed insurgencies.[22]

We understand mutiny as the by-product of relations between the two principal collectivities onboard ship. On one side stands command (the Captain and his officers), and on the other stands the crew (the seamen). Relations between the two are shaped by the officers' ability to provide good governance, on the one side, and by the crew's grievances and its capacity to coordinate collective action, on the other. Mutiny, therefore, is the outcome of the conjunction of demand and supply. The

demand for mutiny resulted from poor governance, especially the provision of insufficient collective goods like security, health and welfare. The failure of governance combined with inadequate monitoring and sanctioning by command led to the erosion of the shipboard social order. The demand for mutiny was shaped by the crew's perceptions that failures of governance were inappropriate and no mere accident.

The supply side of mutiny varies with a crew's capacity to undertake collective action in response to its grievances. Seamen varied in their capacity to act together, especially in so dangerous and uncertain a venture as mutiny. The everyday social practices of seamen, their informal organization and their occupational culture, provided them with resources that they could use in making a rebellion. They were accustomed to teamwork and had experienced shipmates with the skills and authority to act as leaders. In conflicts with command, they developed practices to activate group solidarity and bolster commitment to mutinies. Even so, mutinies were usually only risked when seamen saw shared threats to safety and welfare that were likely to worsen if they took no action. Situations like these naturally enhance coordination and mean that free riding does not pay.[23]

Planning a mutiny and mobilizing seamen to risk their lives represented a supreme test of the solidarity of seamen and their ability to coordinate their actions. Facing violent resistance from the authorities in the struggle to take and hold ships, and facing possible death by hanging in the wake of mutiny, rebellion in the Navy was not something that seamen undertook lightly. Most often, they mutinied when they felt that they had legitimate grievances and no other means of voicing them. Mutiny reflected badly on the governance of the ship by the Captain and his officers.

To evaluate these ideas, we conducted the first systematic study of naval mutiny in the British Navy during the Age of Sail. Unlike many studies of rebellion, ours includes both cases of ships in which documented episodes of mutiny did occur, and a larger set of nonmutinous cases randomly selected from the population of all ships. Our study compares a sample of mutinies that occurred on naval ships from 1740 to 1820 with a random sample drawn from the much larger population of ships that faced no such rebellion. Whereas scholars of mutiny have endorsed such a design, no previous study attempted it.[24] Fortunately, archival records were an excellent resource, providing comprehensive

documentation that allowed us to analyze quantitative data and rich historical evidence about mutiny and its causes.

1.3 Understanding Rebellion

The goal of this book is to explain mutiny and, in so doing, better understand the causes of rebellion. Rebellion has played a central part in history. It has been a feature of human life ever since the emergence of authority in groups. Nevertheless, rebellion has been notoriously hard to predict.[25] De Tocqueville called rebellions the events that most "surprise and terrify" us.[26] This is partly because subordinates usually tolerate deprivation and inequality for a long time before rebelling. Another reason is that rulers seek to avoid rebellion by controlling their subjects. They try to make them dependent on the authorities for their well-being and fearful of punishment for defiance. This can make rebellion so dangerous a prospect that self-regarding people tend to avoid it in spite of their experience of deprivation. Finally, repression and social inequality often create a situation in which rulers know little about the extent or scale of popular grievances because subordinates have avoided voicing them either for fear of repression or because speaking up accomplishes little.[27]

What is clear – at least to us – is that grievances lie at the heart of rebellion. Nevertheless, a lot of previous scholarship suggests that grievances are *not* useful for explaining popular unrest. Inequality, it has been asserted, is the objective, material foundation of grievance. Yet inequality is ubiquitous and rebellion unusual. Trotsky remarked that if grievances were enough to cause insurrection, the masses would always be in a state of revolt.[28] If grievances are to be inferred merely from evidence of systematic inequality, then the relationship between them and social unrest is weak. A host of cross-sectional and cross-national empirical studies finds scant evidence that material grievances – understood as objective material deprivation – are linked to rebellion.[29]

Today, there is a renaissance in thinking about grievances. Some have argued that rebellion is one of the most important levelers of inequality.[30] Others argue that it is the only kind of voice that oppressed and exploited people have in seeking an improvement of their lot, and that authoritarian rulers only make concessions when they fear an

imminent rebellion.[31] Around the world, unrest occurs in response to discontent with the provision of public goods, the removal or reduction of food subsidies and other threats to popular welfare.[32] In practice, the amelioration of collective grievances seems to be the main payoff that people who take part in rebellions expect.[33]

Part of the confusion about grievances lies in conflating an explanation of rebellion with the study of revolution. Rebellion may result in revolution, war or state collapse but it need not.[34] In fact, even if those macro-level events frequently begin with uprisings, rebellion is far more common than those outcomes. Since many factors besides the inception of rebellion explain why revolutions occur or states collapse, grievances might be thought of as mere background conditions. Explaining the *genesis* of rebellion means studying situations in which potential rebellions do and do not occur, as well as events that never rise to the level of a revolutionary assault on the social order. This is why studying mutinies in the Royal Navy is so valuable.

Another reason is that in studying mutinies we can observe the constitution of social order and its collapse in detail. Ships at sea are worlds in microcosm. Each ship has a political, social and cultural system in which authority must be enacted, compliance won and cooperation attained. Like the cultural historian Paul Gilroy, we are fascinated by "The image of the ship – a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion," a sociological site with an underappreciated theoretical and historical importance.[35] Understanding the governance of ships and the establishment of social order, on the one side, and explaining why grievances flourish and social order breaks down, on the other, can teach us much about the genesis of rebellion across places and times.

1.4 Grievances and Governance

We argue that mutiny is the outcome of the conjunction of poor governance, the crew's perception that their situation requires concerted action to prevent decrements to their welfare, and their capacity to coordinate in response to their grievances. The conditions facing seamen in the Navy were not fundamentally different from those that face rebels today