

Convict Labour and the Western Empires, 1415–1954

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Introduction

Between 1415, when the Portuguese first used convict labour in the capture of the Moroccan city of Ceuta, and 1954, when the French penal colony in Guiana closed, the European powers transported hundreds of thousands of convicts, and employed them as unfree labour in overseas colonies. Because convict transportation has either been framed historiographically within the history of crime and punishment, or viewed as part of the history of one nation or empire, there has been a general failure to understand its pan-European scale and scope. This chapter provides a first step in that direction: synthesising the existing literature, offering a starting point for the quantification of convict numbers, and suggesting that penal transportation represented not solely an instrument of punishment or criminal reform, but formed part of a continuum of unfree labour practices that underpinned overseas European expansion.

Famously, the European colonisation of the Americas from the end of the fifteenth century was a coercive process that as a result of the devastation of indigenous peoples relied on the extraction of labour from bonded migrants. The majority of these imported unfree workers were chattel slaves purchased by traders in west and central Africa, and shipped across the Atlantic and sold into enslavement. However, European labour played an important secondary role largely through the process of indenture — a form of assisted migration whereby an individual forfeited claims to wages for a number of years in return for a

passage to an overseas colony.¹ Convicts were also transported from Britain, Ireland, Portugal, France and Spain and either sold for the period of their sentence or set to work for the state. The exploitation of penal labour was relatively new to early modern Europe although a practice widespread in the classical world. While several medieval European societies retained provisions to put convicted prisoners to work, most lacked the infrastructure and resources to implement a system of systematic penal exploitation, instead resorting to execution and other inexpensive public displays of state power. The reappearance of penal labour coincided with the establishment of the centralised state and the development of Western empires.²

Penal transportation both pre-dated and outlasted Atlantic slavery. As a practice, the removal of convict labour from Britain and Ireland was modelled on indenture, although it was a more extreme process that was socially and commercially comparable to slavery. Indeed some slaving practices can be viewed as a form of transportation, especially judicial slavery where the condemned (and on occasion their relatives) became the property of the state. This was a common route into bondage in West Africa.³ It should be noted that slavery, penal transportation and indenture have complex intertwined histories. To provide but one of many examples: convict labour on plantations in the British Caribbean was replaced in the second half of the seventeenth century by slave labour, which was in turn replaced in the nineteenth century by indentured labour from South Asia and China. In short, the three processes — penal transportation, indenture (European and Asian) and enslavement — were strongly related to each other and did not exist as distinct practices.

Although slavery is ancient, persistent and global, it is particularly associated with European colonisation of the New World. The slave trade came under increasing attack, however, because of its unsustainability in the context of the widespread resistance of the enslaved (most famously in the Revolution of 1791–1804 in the French colony of Saint-Domingue), and pressure from metropolitan abolitionists, whether on the grounds of humanitarianism or political economy. Despite this pressure the slave trade and slavery itself were abolished only gradually across the European empires. The British outlawed slave trading in 1807 and slavery in 1834 (with ex-slaves forced into supposedly transitional ‘apprenticeships’); but under East India Company pressure, Parliament excluded the Indian Empire from the 1833 Emancipation Act. Slavery was not abolished in Britain’s Indian Empire until 1843, and slave owning remained legal until 1862. The picture across other empires was similarly variegated. Slavery was abolished in most French colonies in 1848 (but Madagascar not until it became a French colony in 1896), in Dutch colonies in 1863, and in Portuguese Africa in 1869. For many empires, transportation proved a more enduring means of satisfying colonies’ labour needs. As will be shown, convicts were shipped outwards from the metropole to colonies, and multi-directionally between colonies — across imperial spaces — over a period of more than five centuries.

The longevity of penal transportation as a system of securing cheap labour to aid colonial expansion can be ascribed to four inter-related factors. First, convict transportation attracted remarkably little comment from either metropolitan elites or colonial interlocutors since it could be argued that, unlike slaves, convicts were the agents of their own demise.⁴ Thus convicts —

especially when sentenced in the colonies — attracted relatively little metropolitan or colonial concern.

Second, convict transportation was flexible in that it provided a means of securing a cheap, controllable and easily replaceable form of labour, and convicts could be forced to go to places where free labourers would not settle. The point here is not to compare sufferings, but to note that, though they often lived and worked under remarkably similar conditions, slaves represented a financial investment, whereas convicts usually did not. As Matthew Mancini so memorably recalled, repeating an elderly businessman's description of the leasing of convict labour in the American south: *One Dies, Get Another*.⁵

Third, penal transportation delivered an effective tool for policing metropolitan and colonial populations. In this sense it might be viewed as one element of the expansion of colonial governmentality, as well as the more general shift from the private to public management of labour in the age of imperial expansion.⁶

Fourth, transportation was *perceived* as less costly than the penal alternative — the construction of new or extension of existing penitentiaries — a point that holds even though it co-existed with local incarceration and even if it was subsequently argued that transportation systems and penal colonies cost more than convict labour saved in the hire of free labour. An exploration of these processes and the connections between them provides an account of the origins, longevity and ultimate demise of convict transportation within Western empires.

Defining Convict Transportation

Any attempt to enumerate the contribution of convict labour to European overseas colonial development rests on a definition of what constitutes penal transportation. A transported worker can be seen as an individual convicted by a civil or military court and subsequently relocated to a colony to perform labour services for a period at least nominally defined by the sentence passed upon him or her. While it is sometimes assumed that the labour of transported convicts was exploited exclusively by the state, historically this was far from the case. Thus seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British and French transportation systems relied on the sale of convicts to the private sector, where they were treated as a form of indentured labour. This illustrates the way in which convict transportation is often difficult to distinguish from other forms of labour extraction. As already pointed out, many West Africans were condemned into slavery as a result of sentences imposed upon them. The only distinction between this practice and European transportation is that, in contrast to slaves, the children of convicts were born free.

Another area of potential confusion revolves around the question of what constitutes conviction. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, it was not uncommon for prisoners of war to be transported. Despite the lack of a formal sentence, the state treated such individuals as convicts, especially when deemed to be in a state of rebellion. Parallels appear here with the Spanish use of transportation as a tool for dealing with rebellious Apache in America or indeed the transportation of ‘mutineers’ from India to the Andaman Islands in 1858. This survey includes rebels as convicts where they are fed into existing transportation flows, though it excludes prisoners of war removed to various outposts of empire, but not subjected to coercive labour extraction. Thus, 26,000

Afrikaners taken in the South African War (1899–1902) were moved to camps in St Helena, India, Ceylon and Bermuda. They were, however, not required to work, let alone work alongside other unfree migrants.⁷

Finally, a considerable overlap existed between transportation and military service. The Portuguese, Spanish and British deployed prisoners convicted by civil and military courts as soldiers in areas associated with high death rates. The French operated a sophisticated variant of this system whereby on release from gaol petty criminals were forced to serve as conscripts in the notorious *Bataillons d'Infanterie Légère d'Afrique* (BILA). While these units were not manned by serving convicts, conviction *was* a necessary prerequisite of service; the BILA functioned as a military equivalent of the civil *bagne* in Guiana, stationed in North Africa and other colonial theatres.

The question of what ordinary people thought about penal transportation adds further depth to the question of definition. Though differences between penal and other labour categories may have seemed obvious (and meaningful) to colonial officials, it is less clear that subject populations drew such distinctions. Given the preceding sketch of the multiple overlaps between unfree labour practices, this should not be surprising. In the Australian colonies, for instance, British and Irish convicts called themselves ‘slaves’, at least in part as a rhetorical alignment and an appeal to the anti-transportation lobby.⁸ In the Indian penal settlement in Mauritius, South Asian convicts used the description *sipahis* (soldiers), and in Singapore they used *kumpane ke naukur* (East India Company servants), which was also bound up with the idea of military service (*naukur*).⁹

The Imperial Scale and Reach of Penal Transportation

The labour services that convicts performed were diverse and could encompass land clearance; infrastructural work, including the building of barracks, fortifications, roads and bridges; agriculture and cultivation of rubber, silk and salt; tin and coal mining; working as personal servants or grooms; or maritime or military service. During the initial stages of colonisation convicts were often deployed in ‘frontier’ zones. These covered culturally unfamiliar, uninhabited and densely forested lands, littorals and islands. In these years, in general terms convict flows coalesced with those of other migrants, notably of African slaves and European indentured labourers. From the end of the eighteenth century, however, the character of the flows changed and most convicts were sent to specially designated penal settlements and colonies. There attempts were made to isolate them from neighbouring communities, whether comprising indigenous people or migrant settlers.

These penal settlements and colonies could be remarkably socially complex. Though most convicts were put to hard labour, in some cases, suitably qualified or educated transportees became convict clerks, overseers, policeman and foremen. The overwhelming majority of convicts were men, and women tended to form a small cohort. This meant many penal settlements and colonies were significantly homosocial. Convict women were often (though not always) confined separately, and put to different kinds of domestic labour. Furthermore, convict flows were characterised by complex racial stratifications; and European, African, American, Amerindian, Asian and Eurasian convicts could be shipped to different colonies or settlements, separated within them, and/or made subject to differential penal and work regimes.

Five European nations made extensive use of convict transportation to assist the wider process of colonisation. The Portuguese, Spanish, British and French deployed convicts to over forty colonial destinations bordering the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans. While some Russian convicts were shipped by sea from the Black Sea port of Odessa to the island of Sakhalin in the years 1879–1905, most were moved overland to Siberia. Because of its largely terrestrial nature, we have omitted the Russian use of transportation from this account, concentrating instead on Western European movement of convicts to and between colonies linked by sea-routes. There nonetheless existed many similarities between Russian and other European transportation systems, not least the use of convicts to supply cheap labour on colonial frontiers.

Some other European polities also experimented with transportation. Dutch East India Company courts imposed sentences of transportation on colonial populations, its settlement in the Cape receiving an estimated 2,500 Asian convicts in the period to 1799; most were convicted in Batavia.¹⁰ The Habsburgs used convict labour to stabilise frontier zones, and the Prussian state sold convicts to the Russians.¹¹ No evidence indicates, however, that transportation was used to supply convicts to German or Italian colonies or the Belgian Congo. This is probably not accidental, as the Western empires that made the heaviest use of transportation had a history of involvement in other unfree labour practices, notably slavery.

The Portuguese Empire

The Portuguese were the first European nation to use transportation as a means of populating colonial possessions. As they were also amongst the last to end the

practice, the Portuguese state's involvement in transportation spanned 539 years. Convict soldiers and sailors were employed in the conquest of Ceuta in 1415. Thereafter convicts, or *degredados*, featured in the colonisation of São Tomé as well as Angola, Mozambique, Goa and Brazil.¹² *Degredados* were also used to man fortifications and factories in West Africa, notably El Mina.¹³ Those colonies associated with particularly high disease rates received large numbers of *degredados*; this applied particularly to Portuguese possessions in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁴

Once the Portuguese had established an overseas empire, minor flows of convicts between their various colonial possessions augmented the transportation from the metropole. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century a three-way trade in convicts, vagrants and gypsies developed between Portugal, Brazil and Angola.¹⁵ Thus, amongst convicts in Angola in the early twentieth century, one in five came from other Portuguese colonies — notably Mozambique, the Cape Verde Islands and Goa.¹⁶ Unlike other transportation systems, the labour of *degredados* does not appear to have been generally used on public works projects, at least not before the latter half of the nineteenth century. Convicts were, however, commonly employed as soldiers.¹⁷ In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Angola those that did not succumb to disease often moved into the interior, where they attempted to establish themselves as petty slavers in the Luso-African controlled trade.¹⁸ Similarly in Mozambique convicts freed upon landing frequently drifted into the interior to become *sertanejos* or backwoodsmen. Others set themselves up as craftsmen and retailers or occupied petty administrative positions — a necessity caused by the dearth of alternative sources of European labour.¹⁹

About 400 of the 1000 or so colonists sent to Bahia in Brazil in 1549 were *degradados*.²⁰ As with every other Portuguese colonial possession, Brazil continued to receive drafts of convicts. As well as deporting *degradados* to Angola, from the 1740s onwards the Brazilian colonial authorities also shipped them to the island of Fernao de Noronah.²¹ Transportation to Brazil ceased only when the colony gained independence in 1822.

There is some evidence that other Portuguese settlements followed the Australian lead and set up anti-transportation movements. Penal reforms in 1852 at first limited transportation to India for less serious offenders, and then from 1869 onwards restricted the shipping of convicts to African colonies. The exile of *degradados* to Cape Verde and São Tomé ended in the early 1880s and to Mozambique in 1885. Angola, however, continued to receive convicts, partially because the small size of the Portuguese population fuelled concerns that the colony would fall prey to British, French, German or Belgian imperial ambitions. In 1883 a series of purpose-built institutions (depositories) were constructed for fresh imports of *degradados*. At the same time agricultural penal settlements were set up in the interior, although they were soon closed because of high death rates. In 1894 an alternative plan set up a series of militarised agrarian outposts staffed by convicts. These also proved failures. Despite this, and the collapse of other agricultural schemes, it took until 1932 for transportation to Angola from metropolitan Portugal to be abolished. Even then the colony continued to receive convicts from São Tomé, Cape Verde and Guinea until the complete abolition of transportation in 1954.²² The best estimate of the number of convicts transported by the Portuguese is 100,000.²³

The Spanish Empire

The Spanish use of transportation dates to at least the first half of the sixteenth century, when Phillip II advised his viceroys that ‘some men are incorrigible, inobedient, or harmful, and are to be expelled from the land and sent to Chile, the Philippines or other parts’.²⁴ Most convicts were sent to *presidios*, fortified settlements established to exert military control in colonial borderlands. This practice lasted until 1911, when the convicts held in Spanish enclaves in North Africa were repatriated.²⁵ The total number of *presidios* established within the Spanish Empire is difficult to calculate, but between 1524 and 1821 over 100 were constructed in northern New Spain, Alta California and Spanish Florida alone.²⁶ Others were established in Africa, elsewhere in the Americas, Asia and Oceania. The number of convicts transported from Spain to *presidios* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries appears to have been small, most were sent to Oran, Melilla and neighbouring settlements in North Africa. They included amongst their number a grandson of Columbus, who received a ten-year sentence for trigamy in 1563.²⁷

High death rates meant that many *presidios* were short of labour and frequently demanded new consignments of convicts.²⁸ Many laboured as fortress and dockyard construction workers in the Spanish Caribbean, where they were considered to be cheaper and more expendable than slaves.²⁹ Between 1703 and 1811 the Acordada, the most important law enforcement agency in New Spain, issued 19,410 sentences to *presidios*.³⁰ Additional numbers were sent to Havana, in Cuba, and San Juan, in Puerto Rico, from metropolitan Spain.³¹

The Spanish *presidio* system in North Africa operated from the early fifteenth century to 1911. Some *presidarios* were employed constructing

fortifications while others served in penal military units. Hard data on the number of convicts is difficult to locate, but it is clear from desertion, death and sentence completion rates that turnover was significant. Based on the available data, we estimate that 26,000 served in Oran between 1509 and 1708 and again from 1732 until the sale of the settlement to the Ottomans in 1792. On the basis of the ratio of *presidarios* serving in Oran compared to the *presidios* of Melilla and nearby El Peñón in the years 1772–1788, it is likely that at least a further 13,000 were sent to North Africa by the close of the eighteenth century.³²

In the early nineteenth century the number of troops sent to the North African *presidios* declined and convicts were increasingly used as soldiers, as well as in construction and as servants, watermen, policemen, bakers and gardeners.³³ Newspaper reports suggest that convict strength stood at three to six thousand at any one time. We estimate that the Spanish transported at least 40,000 during the nineteenth century. About 1000 convicts also arrived in Fernando Po from the Philippines, Cuba and metropolitan Spain between 1862 and 1899.³⁴

Table 1. Estimates of Spanish Convict Transportation Flows, 1550–1911

<i>Origin</i>	<i>Destination</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Est.</i> <i>Number</i>
Spain	Cuba and Puerto Rico	1769–1837	4,000
New Spain	New World <i>presidios</i>	1550–1811	25,000
Spain	North African <i>presidios</i>	1550–1911	80,000

Cuba and Philippines	Fernando Po	1862–1899	1000
Total		1550–1911	110,000

The French Empire

As early as 1552 the French used convicts on colonial expeditions in the north Atlantic, although before the nineteenth century it was more common for criminals to be sentenced to galley service in Brest, Toulon and other French ports.³⁵ On occasion, however, petty criminals were sold as *engagés* or indentured servants with around 600 shipped to Louisiana between 1719 and 1721. The practice ceased because of high death rates and the falling share price of the West Indies Company, although between 1721 and 1749 a further 720 were exiled to Canada for offences that included poaching, smuggling and selling untaxed salt.³⁶ The Seven Years War cut short the transportation of convicts to New France, and there appears to have been no further attempt to ship convicts overseas until the 1790s. During the French Revolution small numbers of political prisoners (under 700) were exiled to Cayenne (French Guiana). Despite high death rates, the policy was not abandoned until the Portuguese occupied the colony in 1809.³⁷ The reform of the penal code in 1810 formally restricted transportation to political offenders, although the lack of a suitable site meant that in practice the punishment was not used.

French courts reintroduced transportation in 1848 as a punishment for non-political offences. The first contingent of 2,200 convicts arrived in French Guiana in 1852, directed to work ‘in the most painful tasks of colonization and

all other works of public utility'.³⁸ While penal legislation made favourable reference to the British penal colonies in Australia, the abolition of slavery within the French Empire in 1848 provided a more immediate stimulus.³⁹ The first convicts to arrive in Cayenne were set to work clearing the Iles du Salut for cultivation and building. Shortly afterwards an agricultural establishment was set up near the mouth of the Oyapock River on the site of a former sugar plantation, with ex-slaves used as convict overseers.⁴⁰ The subsequent introduction of Indian indentured workers into Guiana after 1861 added a further layer of complexity to this interconnected history of labour exploitation.

Annual death rates of eleven percent necessitated the shifting of the first settlements in Guiana to higher ground. This did little to alleviate the problem, and of the first 8,000 French *bagnards* transported to South America, half were dead by 1857. As in Portuguese Angola, repeated experimentation with new locations failed to solve the problem and the colonial administration was forced to conclude that Europeans were unsuitable for hard labour in the tropics.⁴¹ While colonial subjects from Algeria, Senegal and Indo-China continued to be sent to Guiana, a new European penal colony was established in New Caledonia. It operated from 1864 to 1922, although the last convict shipment arrived in 1897.⁴²

During this period at least 22,000 prisoners landed in New Caledonia, including 5,000 political exiles of the 1871 Paris Commune. Although the annual death rates were lower than those of Guiana, at two to three percent, they remained high by the standards of the British settlement in Australia.⁴³ Well-behaved prisoners were put to outdoor labour on public works projects, or hired out to private individuals. In some cases land grants were provided for expirées

in the hope of encouraging long-term settlement. Many argued, however, that penal transportation acted as a brake on free migration, and so colonists campaigned for abolition.⁴⁴ At the same time, others argued that New Caledonia amounted to a tropical paradise for the convicts and called for harsher measures. Thus in 1887 metropolitan transportation to Guiana resumed for serious offenders. Following the cessation of transportation to New Caledonia in 1897, the *bagne* in Guiana once more became the sole terminus of French civilian transportation policy. The last prisoner was released in 1953, and estimates of transported convicts range up to 70,000.

A system of French military transportation operated in parallel to the Guiana and New Caledonia schemes. While the French army made use of penal battalions after 1818, they became increasingly associated with colonial service following the occupation of Algeria in 1830. Initially three *Bataillons d'Infanterie Légère d'Afrique* were established in 1832–1833; with two more added in 1888. These were manned by military convicts and prisoners sentenced to between three months and three years followed by service as a conscript. After the 1848 revolution 6,000 political and civilian prisoners were also sent to the military *bagne* in Africa.⁴⁵ The battalions laboured in construction work and colonial engagements in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia as well as the Crimea (1854–1856), Syria (1860–1861) and Mexico (1862–1867). Over 600,000 people served in the convict forces, including during the First World War in France. Between 1832 and 1972, when the last company was disbanded in French Somalia, men served as conscripts in penal units in colonial theatres.⁴⁶

Table 2. Estimates of French Convict Transportation Flows, 1552–1938

<i>Origin</i>	<i>Destination</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Est. Number</i>
France	New France	1552–1749	1000
France	Louisiana	1719–1721	600
France	Cayenne	1792–1809	700
France	Algeria	1848–1850	6,000
France and colonies	Guiana	1852–1938	70,000
France	New Caledonia	1864–1897	22,000
Total		1552–1938	100,300

The British Empire

The English state started to experiment with transportation in the early seventeenth century although only a few dozen convicts were sent overseas before 1642. Transportation spiked during the Commonwealth, although the claim that 50,000 were sent to the Caribbean and North American colonies from Ireland alone in the period 1652–1659 almost certainly represents an overestimate.⁴⁷ Many of those deported from England during this period were prisoners of war, and they continued to be sent until the defeat of the second Jacobite rebellion at Culloden in 1746. Between 1648 and that date at least 4,000 rebels and captured soldiers were transported.⁴⁸ Court records indicate that they were joined by around 6,000 convicts convicted in civilian courts between 1660 and 1718, and sentenced to be sold in the Americas. After that date the pace of transportation increased, with an estimated 48,000 more sent between 1718 and

1775.⁴⁹ Although the American Revolution ended transatlantic transportation from England and Scotland, shipping contractors attempted to offload a further 1,000 convicts from Ireland between 1776 and 1789.⁵⁰

Thereafter the British experimented with transportation to West Africa, sending at least one thousand convict soldiers between 1766 and 1784 to forts and trading outposts. While the use of convicts as soldiers came under fire from slaving interests (concerned that the use of white servile labour undermined the racial division of labour), it was reintroduced in 1800 and continued until the disbanding of the Royal African Corps in 1826.⁵¹ Like other European strategists the British used convicted labour to supplement military strength in tropical areas — a practice that peaked during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. Roger Buckley estimates that 20 percent of all British troops serving in the West Indies between 1799 and 1802 were convicts. Dedicated penal battalions were raised in 1806 and again in 1808 for services in the West Indies.⁵² Given the horrendous death rates that afflicted Europeans in tropical areas, the total number of convicts serving in British military units in the period 1766–1826 must have been considerable.⁵³

The British first sent convicts to Australia in 1787, the Botany Bay decision largely shaped by the lack of alternative transportation destinations. Race became a key consideration. Other than as part of a military detachment, it proved increasingly difficult to deploy European unfree labour in the Atlantic world. While it was possible for the British government to supply convicts to the East India Company, the Company had its own source of penal labour. From 1787 it shipped Indian convicts to Bencoolen, a short-lived British outpost on the island of Sumatra (in the East Indies), and from 1790 to the newly conquered

island of Penang. By the early nineteenth century it had become Company policy to send Europeans convicted in Indian courts to the Australian penal colonies and Asian convicts to destinations within the wider Indian Ocean world.⁵⁴ However, several hundred black convicts counted amongst the 167,000 prisoners shipped to Australia from Britain, the Caribbean, Mauritius, the Cape Colony and New Zealand.⁵⁵

As in French Guiana, the British on occasion substituted convicts for slaves, enabling colonial administrators to engage in the rhetoric of abolition while securing an alternative source of labour. When Stamford Raffles took control of Bencoolen in 1818, one of his first acts was to abolish slavery. Almost immediately he replaced slaves with regular shipments of Bengal convicts. Indian convicts were subsequently used in Malacca and Singapore (which with Penang constituted the Straits Settlements), as well as Burma.

Following the abolition of slavery across much of the empire in 1834, the British wound back penal transportation in all areas other than the Asian colonies. The last convicts to depart Britain arrived in Gibraltar in 1870.⁵⁶ However, the number of convicts sentenced to penal servitude in Britain's Asian colonies increased. The British had experimented with a penal colony in the Andaman Islands in 1793–1799, shipping 300 convicts until the settlement was devastated by disease and abandoned.⁵⁷ The islands again became a destination for convicts following the 1857 Rebellion and received a further 80,000 convicts up to 1940.⁵⁸

Table 3. Estimates of British Convict Transportation Flows, 1615–1940

<i>Origin</i>	<i>Destination</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Est. Number</i>
England and Wales	Caribbean and American colonies	1615– 1717	6,000
Scottish prisoners of war	Caribbean and American colonies	1648– 1656	2,000
Ireland	Caribbean	1652– 1659	5,000
Monmouth Rebels	American colonies	1685	800
Jacobite Rebels	American colonies	1715– 1746	1,300
Britain and Ireland	American colonies	1718– 1774	48,000
Ireland	American colonies	1776– 1789	1,000
Britain and Ireland	Military service	1766– 1826	15,000
Britain and Ireland	New South Wales	1788– 1850	83,000
British colonies	New South Wales	1807– 1842	500
British colonies	Van Diemen's Land	1803– 1853	67,500
British colonies	Van Diemen's Land	1810– 1853	5,000
Britain and Ireland	Port Phillip	1846–	3,000

		1850	
Britain and Ireland	Western Australia	1850–	9,700
		1868	
Britain and Ireland	Bermuda	1824–	9,000
		1863	
Britain and Ireland	Gibraltar	1842–	9,000
		1875	
British India	Bencoolen	1787–	2,000
		1825	
British India	Straits	1790–	20,000
	Settlements*	1873	
Straits	British India	1836–	1,000
Settlements**		1864	
British India	Labuan	1851–	500
		1880	
British India and	Mauritius	1815–	1,500
Ceylon		1853	
British India	Tenasserim	1828–	5,000
		1862	
Bombay Presidency	Aden	1841–	150
		1850	
Bengal Presidency	Andaman Islands	1793–	300
		1796	
British India plus	Andaman Islands	1858–	80,000
Burma and		1940	

Hyderabad

Total	1615–	376,250
	1940	

* Straits Settlements = Penang, Malacca and Singapore

** Straits Settlements plus Burma and Hong Kong

Convict Transportation and Western Imperialism

As mentioned earlier, over time there occurred a shift in the character of penal transportation, away from the assimilation of convicts into larger labour streams, and towards the establishment of discrete, isolated, penal colonies. Each convict flow was generated, sustained and ultimately abolished for combinations of economic, penal and social reasons, including those bound up with the use of labour for national or imperial expansive strategies. Over time the emphasis on extractive labour was maintained. Each was also deeply embedded in a larger repertoire of confinement concerned with the management and control of labour and social ‘undesirables’. Penal transportation, thus, may be situated as part of a larger imperial history of labour, labour management and labour circulation — although this remains largely unrecognised in the current historiography.⁵⁹

In a highly influential claim, often cited since its publication in 1900, H. J. Nieboer stated that when land is abundant and cheap, unfree labour becomes a necessity — and therefore there is a strong connection between unfreedom and the desire to expand into unsettled land (or what Nieboer called ‘open resources’).⁶⁰ Certainly, his assertion appears to hold true for penal transportation. There indeed existed a close association between the use of

convict labour and colonies where free migrants could easily acquire land and hence escape waged labour.⁶¹ In practice, convicts often shifted between what Jan Lucassen has called the ‘unfree’ and ‘independent’ labour markets, combining forced work over which they had little control with other economic activities, including petty production.⁶² This was typical of convict labour in early New South Wales.⁶³

Despite the potential of penal transportation to help explain that most Eurocentric global phenomenon — the rise of Europe — paradoxically it also offers a less Eurocentric way of understanding global history. The extent of intra-colonial transportation foregrounds not metropolitan flows of convicts outward, but the importance of the geographical ‘circulation’ of convicts. It opens out to view labour mobility as more than a straightforward migratory process with an easily defined geographical start and end point.⁶⁴

In total, over 680,000 convicts were transported by the Western empires in the period 1415–1952 (substantially more if the French use of convicted labour to maintain the ranks of the BILA is included). If the Russian Empire were also incorporated, well over a million convicts were unwillingly co-opted into European colonisation projects.⁶⁵ While this amounts to fewer than the number of slaves and indentured labourers used by European colonisers, transportation played a pioneering role in the colonisation process, through providing the necessary labour to establish colonial bridgeheads. Following the rise of the Atlantic slave trade, penal transportation became pivotal in supplying labour for fortification construction and defense. In the long-run it proved more durable than slavery, surviving the abolition era in all Western empires. While this enabled the continued movement of convicts from metropolitan areas to

overseas penal settlements, it also provided colonial authorities with the means to relocate ‘undesirable’ subjects to the imperial margins. Both the British and the Spanish, for example, sentenced slaves to transportation and all Western empires established complex inter-colonial transportation flows.⁶⁶

The demographic legacy of convict transportation varies. By and large, convicts did not make a substantial contribution to the growth of colonial populations as death rates were high and only small numbers of women were deported. There are many descendants who proclaim convict ancestry in the Andamans and Australia; but in other places convicts either merged into the wider population when they had children with non-convict women or were repatriated at the end of their sentence.⁶⁷

Transportation was an instrument designed to achieve multiple objectives. It aimed to curb metropolitan crime rates, supply military and civilian labour to areas of colonial shortage, relocate those who threatened imperial security and pacify subject populations through the threat of enforced removal.⁶⁸ Durable and flexible, it provided a tool that framed European colonisation. Convicts were present in the early sorties into North and West Africa and across the Atlantic. Four centuries later they were still there, defending Spanish colonial interests in the Rif, fighting in BILA units in Algeria, manning frontier settlements in Angola and surviving in the Andaman Islands until released by the occupying forces of Japan’s Asian Empire in 1942.

¹ Farley Grubb, ‘The Transatlantic Market for British Convict Labor’, *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2000), p. 103.

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