French Convicts in Canada: 1541-1543

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While much has been written about French navigation and colonial settlement in America, few authors have dwelt on the carceral dimensions underlying these attempts. This is the case, among others, for the third and last expedition of Jacques Cartier and of J-F de La Rocque de Roberval from 1541 to 1543, which included a large number of convicts among the colonists.

Flash back

At the turn of the 16th century, the voyages of the first European explorers in Newfoundland were quickly followed by the arrival of a large number of cod fishermen and whale hunters. From the 1520s, the French (Verrazano) looked to settle in America, both to compete with the Iberians, seek precious metals and look for a hypothetical passage to China. Between 1534 and 1536, the Breton navigator Jacques Cartier mapped the Gulf of St. Lawrence from Newfoundland to Montreal and spent the winter near present-day Quebec City. Due to war and political imperatives, however, the expedition planned for 1537 was postponed until the spring of 1541.
During these four years, the scale of the initial project was expanded. Jacques Cartier envisaged a simple continuation of his explorations upstream of the St. Lawrence River, but the king decided instead to add a colonial dimension to this venture, in order to put down permanent roots in the New World. Confronted with a lack of voluntary candidates willing to settle or work in the colony, the recruitment of convicts became the ideal solution. Especially since after the end of the war (1538), the kingdom had faced the problem of prison overcrowding. Thus, at the end of the summer of 1540, Francis I asked French magistrates to transform the punishment for most capital and other criminal offences into sentences of overseas banishment with forced labour.

The King of France appointed to the command of the future colony a trusted soldier: Jean-François de La Rocque de Roberval. A military leader, he was qualified and available to serve as Lieutenant Governor in Canada. The presence of Roberval also aimed to free Jacques Cartier who had been charged with an enormous colonial project and who felt uncomfortable with its carceral dimension. But he had to speed up preparations. In addition to the artisans needed to build dwellings, the colony needed soldiers and settlers to clear and cultivate the land.

The profile of the convicts

While the decision to establish a colony in Canada was primarily motivated by the desire to confront the Spanish in America, other reasons explain the transformation of the voyage of exploration into the establishment of a penal colony. If the lack of candidate is the basic argument, prison overcrowding and the Spanish colonial precedent, led the French towards an inevitable choice.

The core of the expedition consisted of artisans, mariners, soldiers, friends of Cartier and military colleagues of La Rocque de Roberval. A number of carpenters, blacksmiths, metallurgists,
shoemakers, stonemcutters, and other craftsmen were recruited among the French artisans. The rest of the settlers were prisoners picked up from French jails.

It is impossible, due to the state of the sources, to draw a comprehensive census of these people. Moreover, we have to deduct those who became sick, died or escaped during their transfer, as well as those who obtained remission of sentence. Nevertheless, we have estimated that convicts constituted less than one-quarter of the people taking this voyage, and there was a maximum of between 50 and 70 prisoners for each of the two fleets.

Although there was no typical profile, we can make some generalisations about the inmates. They were for the most part common criminals, and no religious (Protestant) or political prisoners were exiled to Canada. We can remark among other things, that women constituted about 10% of the prisoners, a relatively high number for the first year of a colonial establishment. Though the secondary objective of this colonial attempt was to empty the French jails of dangerous, irreclaimable or undesirable elements, the prisoners were not selected randomly. The lack of space aboard the ships encouraged the officers in charge to select multi-skilled convicts, who could serve out their sentence through hard labour and thus exercise a useful function in the colony.

The financial contribution of the convicts was also taken into account. That is why colonial recruiters particularly courted noble and wealthy soldiers. These rich convicts financially supported the voyage and possessed an essential know-how in the handling of weapons. They could, in return for their services, become noblemen seigniorial system of the new colony.

The mustering

As leader of the expedition, La Rocque de Roberval, was deeply involved in the recruitment of the group of prisoners whom he considered vital for the colony. The way he undertook this task shows that failure was not on the agenda. Not only did he manage the process of recruitment from Paris, but he also visited several prisons to talk directly with convicts. In fact, nearly half of the prisoners brought to Canada were drawn from Paris jails, because it was in the capital, that most criminal appeals from provincial courts were judged.

Unable to be present on all fronts at once, Roberval delegated part of the task to about forty people, who visited the main courts and jails of the kingdom - with the exception of the south-east where the convicts were reserved for the Mediterranean galleys in Marseille. Unlike Paris, where there was a strict selection of the inmates, the further away from the capital, the less rigorous the quality. By leaving the task to other less qualified agents, the choice of prisoners was ultimately left to the goodwill of the provincial authorities, who often emptied their jails of the worst cases. People accused of begging, sodomy, robbery, assault, rape, homicide, etc. - and for the most part, without any financial resources. These negative profiles where in part counterbalanced by the presence of gentlemen, squires or knights who had been convicted for duelling, homicide or other offences.
Specifically, the convicts were sent individually or in groups to the ports of embarkation of the two fleets, namely Saint-Malo in Brittany and Honfleur in Normandy. Several convoys of chained detainees crossed France on roads or by waterways. For instance, one of these convoys left Toulouse in the spring of 1541. The convicts walked for a week, with chained hands and feet, to reach the port of Bordeaux, where they were embarked for Saint-Malo. They were then transferred to the ships of Jacques Cartier who went to sea on May 23rd.

Arriving in Canada, at Cap Rouge near present-day Quebec City, at the end of August 1541, the prisoners were immediately set to work to clear the fields and forests, cut trees, carry stones, earth and other necessary tasks for the construction the palisades and buildings. In September, Cartier took the opportunity to go up the St. Lawrence River to Montreal, which he had visited in 1535, in order to progress the search for a passage to Asia.

The second fleet led by Roberval, stationed in Honfleur, was delayed by logistical problems, but also by the threat of war with Spain, which would have cancelled his departure. The other convict chain gangs arriving from Paris, among other places, had to wait all summer long in the prisons of Rouen and Honfleur for the ships. Having left it too late (by the end of August 1541) to undertake the voyage across the Atlantic, La Rocque de Roberval chose instead to remain off the coast of Brittany to hold to ransom ships trading with Spain. His colleagues who commanded the other ships stationed in the Bay of Brest were confronted with several months of waiting and even to a mutiny of seamen wanting to go ashore.

They finished the winter off La Rochelle, from where they left for Canada in April 1542. During a stopover in Saint John Newfoundland in early June, they disembarked the settlers, prisoners and cattle exhausted by a long and difficult crossing. Roberval then had the surprise of seeing Cartier’s ships arrive from on their way to France. The latter said that during his stay in Canada, brawls had
broken out between convicts and “natives” which led to the death of thirty French settlers. After a
winter in a state of siege, additional deaths and the failure of spring reinforcements to arrive, Cartier
decided to pack up. Roberval ordered the Breton navigator to come back to Canada with his fleet,
but he refused to be again confronted by “natives”. He set his sails for France during the night,
leaving Roberval with a ship and crew, and a few soldiers and prisoners to reoccupy the colonial site.

La Rocque de Roberval’s ships finally quit Newfoundland at the end of June, sailed up the St.
Lawrence River and arrived at the colony in mid-July. Unlike Cartier, who was unable to manage the
convicts, Roberval and his small garrison established a martial regime. Food rationing was imposed
and those who did not work had no access to food. Above all, to suppress disorder, the slightest
insubordination was severely punished. Prisoners (men and women) were put in irons, whipped or
even hanged for minor offenses. Confronted with the arrival of these new occupants equipped with
weapons, horses and cannons, the “natives” stopped their belligerent relations and resumed contact
with the French colonists to exchange, among other things, food for European objects.

The winter of 1542-1543 was particularly deadly. In addition to deaths from injuries and various
illnesses, about 50 settlers or prisoners were decimated by scurvy. In June Roberval again went up
the St. Lawrence with 70 soldiers and settlers to check if he could pass beyond the place reached by
Cartier the year before. On his return, ships had arrived from France with supplies, but also with bad
news. Spain and England had declared war on France with the aim of attacking Paris. Francis I
needed La Rocque and as many soldiers and men as possible. Since the colonists could not be left
alone with the prisoners, Roberval decided to close the establishment and re-embark everyone in
the ships to return to France.

We do not know what happened to convicts after the ships arrived in France, but some sources tell
us that some of the survivors were involved in military operations. The luckiest were incorporated as
soldiers into garrisons on the battlefields of northern France. The others worked as forced labour to
repair French fortifications or as rowers in the Mediterranean galleys sent to attack England.

The beginnings of an era

In the 16th century the French were still far from the overseas penitentiaries of the following
centuries, but they already had an elaborate system of prisons, arsenal jails and galleys. There was
but a step to extend this logic of mobile forced labour beyond the limits of the kingdom. For the
French, the 1541 colonial attempt in Canada corresponds to this fateful moment and served as a
precedent for the future. Despite the difficulties linked to the choice and overseas transportation of
convicts, France, like other European nations, would continue to follow this route, guided by the
same legal, administrative and military logics. Henceforth the penalties of exile to the colonies would
become an essential outlet for the French penal system and a useful element for the expansion of its
colonial empire.

We have little information on the carceral dimension of other French colonizing efforts, but we can
assume that a small proportion of settlers involved in other voyages to Brazil and Florida (1550 -
1580) was composed of convicts. After pausing during the wars of Religion in France, shipments of
convicts to Canada started again with the attempt to occupy La Roche de Mesgouez (1597-1603) at
Bourbon Island (Sable Island). After the founding of Quebec (1608), New France did not have
convict bagne as in Guyane later on. Those sentenced to exile were transported in navy or
merchant vessels and integrated with colonists and soldiers either to work and/ or to settle in
Canada.
The history of convicts in the French colonial empire is a subject that was relatively neglected in the literature until the middle of the 20th century, because it gave a negative image of the past. Moreover, it was largely surpassed by the parallel existence of the slave trade, of an entirely different magnitude, between Africa and America.

Further Reading


Biggar, H. P., *The Voyages of Cartier*, Ottawa, Archives publiques du Canada, 1924


