

Spanish Empire: Convict Voyages, 1760s-1800

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In the second half of the eighteenth century the Spanish empire included the following territories: peninsular Spain; the North African military outposts of Ceuta, Melilla, Alhucemas and El Peñon de Velez; Cuba, Santo Domingo and Puerto Rico; the Viceroyalty of New Spain, including present-day Mexico, California, New Mexico and the Philippines; the Viceroyalty of New Granada, which included modern Colombia, Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela; the Viceroyalty of Peru, corresponding to modern Peru and Chile; and the Viceroyalty of Rio de la Plata, that separated administratively in 1776 from the Viceroyalty of Peru, and included modern Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay and Uruguay.



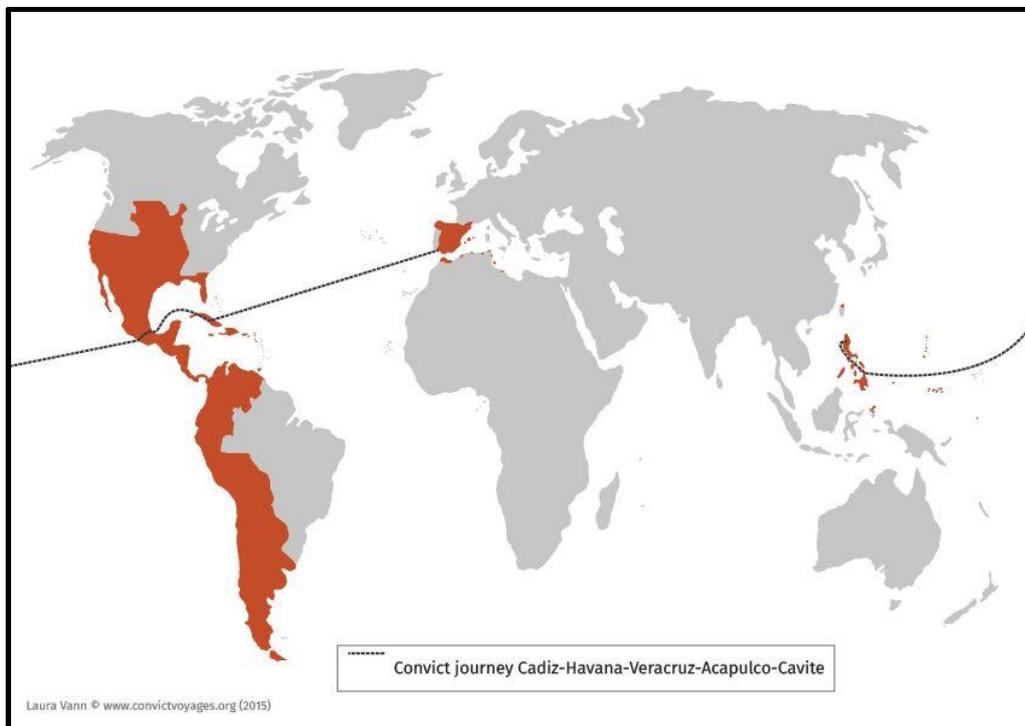
Some of the areas of this immense empire, such as New Spain, the Antilles and Peru, had been conquered in the sixteenth century and by the end of the eighteenth century were firmly under Spanish control. However, other areas like the borderlands of northern New Spain, the regions between Buenos Aires and Santiago de Chile and the southern territories of Patagonia and Araucanía were largely controlled by numerous groups of Indigenous populations. There the Spanish presence was often limited to some scattered missions and military outposts.

Penal transportation in the late eighteenth-century Spanish empire had two important peculiarities that differentiated it from other empires. First, the convicts' destinations were not penal colonies, where convicts represented the whole population (except for those who guarded them); rather, convicts were transported to military forts (*presidios*) where they lived together with the soldiers and their families, merchants, slaves, missionaries, free settlers and groups of native people. Second, a double connection existed between convict transportation and the military, for the main employment of the convicts were either in the army itself (military convicts) or in the

construction of the military infrastructure of the *presidios* (thence the name *presidarios* frequently used to refer to them).

Routes and Hubs

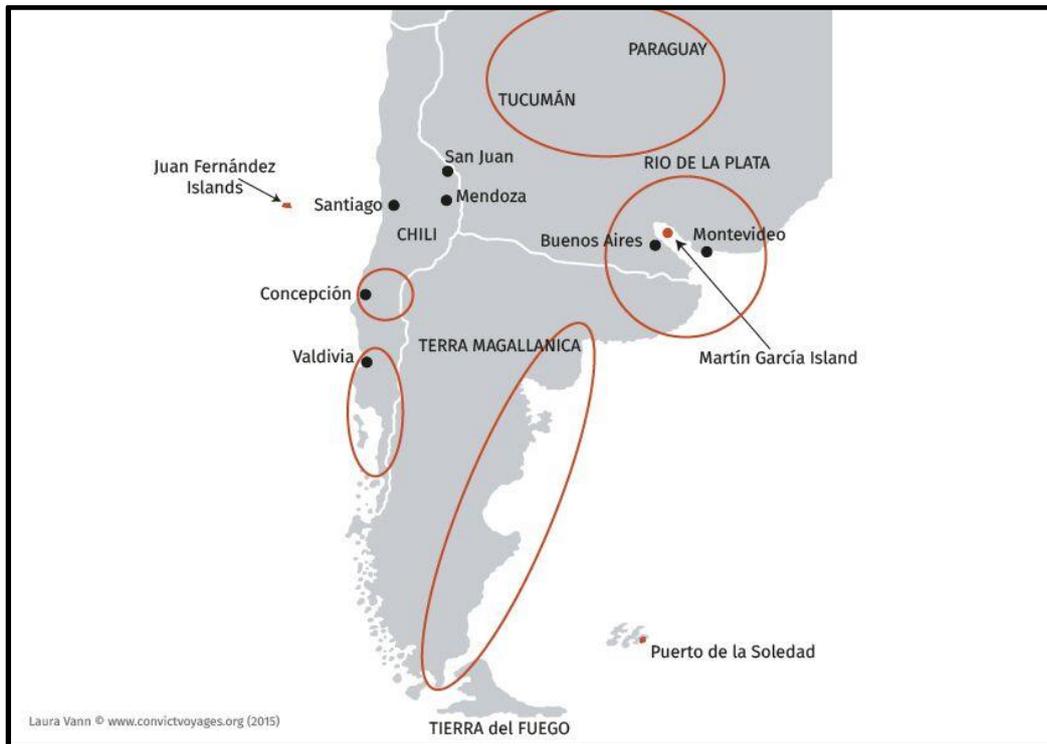
The single most important route of convict transportation linked the Atlantic port of Cadiz, in southern Spain, to Havana in Cuba and San Juan in Puerto Rico, to Cartagena de Indias and Veracruz. We estimate that more than 5,000 prisoners were transported along this route in the second half of the eighteenth century. Among those who sailed to Veracruz, many continued their journey to Acapulco and thence to the port of Cavite, near Manila. Once there, they either remained in the northern islands of the Philippines, or were shipped to the southern islands of Mindanao and Palawan, where other *presidios* existed. The journey from Cadiz to Veracruz lasted approximately 80 days; the march from Veracruz to Acapulco took about 2 months; and the voyage from the Mexican port to the Philippines took more than 3 months.



Convict departing from Cadiz came from both peninsular Spain and the North African *presidios*. Moreover, from Cadiz and other ports in peninsular Spain (especially el Ferrol and la Coruña in the North-West, and Barcelona and Malaga in the Mediterranean sea) prisoners were sent to El Callao (the port of Lima) via Cape Horn, sometimes with stopovers in Montevideo and the Chilean ports of Concepción or Valparaíso.

Not all convict voyages originated in, or went through, peninsular Spain. Havana, Veracruz, Acapulco, El Callao, Montevideo and Buenos Aires were important hubs for the transportation of convicts within Spanish America along both sea- and land-routes. From the Antilles, prisoners were transported to Florida and Louisiana and to the ports of Venezuela; individuals sentenced by the magistrates in Mexico City were shipped from Acapulco to the Philippines; from Ecuador and Peru convicts were transported to the *presidios* in Valdivia and the Juan Fernandez islands (Chile), and from Buenos Aires and Montevideo they reached the settlements in the Malvinas/Falklands and along the coast of Patagonia, established between the 1760s and the early 1780s. From Lima and

Buenos Aires they also travelled along land-routes to the military outposts in the internal regions of Tucumán and the Chaco, and to the frontiers with native populations and the Portuguese.



The transportation to and within South America was quantitatively less relevant than the one that took place to and in the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico, and within New Spain. For example, while 600 prisoners were held in San Juan and one thousand in Havana in the 1770s, the small *presidios* of Patagonia had some 20 convicts each in the same period. However, the strategic function of the southern military outposts, and of the convicts that were transported thereto, should not be underestimated: they provided a defense against the continuous assaults from hostile natives and potential attacks from competing colonial powers (especially the British); they secured the important trade routes through the Cape Horn; and they acted as basis for further exploration and conquest.

Convoys made up exclusively of enchained prisoners (*cuerda de presos*) were marched along the land-routes. Conversely, no specific infrastructure existed for the transportation of convicts along the sea-routes. This instead relied on the military frigates, which transported large groups of soldiers and the military convicts, and the merchant ships that carried silver, gold, mail, fruit and other goods together with colonial officers, merchants, soldiers, missionaries and other passengers. Changes in trade policy and the merchant routes therefore influenced convict transportation. Until the mid-eighteenth century, the routes from Cadiz to the Caribbean (*Carrera de Indias*), from Acapulco to Cavite (*Galeón de Manila*) and from Veracruz to El Callao through Portobelo and Panama (*Galeón de Tierra Firme*) were the only authorized trade routes from peninsular Spain, and therefore also the only routes for convict transportation. However, the process of trade liberalization that gradually took place in the second half of the eighteenth century had a two-fold impact on convict transportation: on the one hand, because more ports were habilitated from commerce across the empire, the origins and destinations of convicts transportation multiplied; on the other hand, because private merchants were authorized to sail between those ports, their ships could now transport prisoners to new destinations. This expansion

of the routes affected all areas of the empire, but while it complemented existing routes in regions such as the Caribbean, it allowed for the opening of entirely new routes in the southern borderlands.

Who Were the Convicts?

Whereas prisoners transported to the *presidios* were almost without exception men, their social and ethnic backgrounds were radically distinct, as were their crimes and age, within each and every place of imprisonment, on each ship and in each convoy, and within each destination. Furthermore, sentences were pronounced by various types of (military and criminal) courts, and although shared laws and orders did exist across the empire, local rules, the legal culture and the actual implementation of the laws varied greatly from place to place. The terms used to refer to the transported convicts in the Spanish empire (*presidarios, desterrados, forzados*, etc.) might include, for example, deported native people from northern New Spain, British and French prisoners of war, peninsular vagrants and deserters, “undisciplined” sons of wealthy Mexican families and sentenced slaves of African descents. The crimes for which convicts were transported also varied. Most military convicts were sentenced for desertion and other military-related crimes (e.g. the abandonment of surveillance), with a part of them also convicted for non-military offences such as theft. Non-military convicts were sentenced for a broad range of crimes, from homosexuality and bigamy to theft and murder. A typical crime, especially in peninsular Spain, was tobacco fraud, which included stealing from the big tobacco manufactures and smuggling across the borders. “Vagrancy” was also considered a major crime, which could result in either impressment in the army and the navy, forced labour in the arsenals and exile in overseas *presidios*.

The length of presidio sentence lasted on average from 1 to 10 years, with “perpetual exile” sometimes also being imposed. A relationship usually existed between crime and destination. From the Spanish peninsula, for example, prisoners sentenced for relatively minor crimes tended to be transported to Ceuta, Melilla and Oran in North Africa, while major crimes implied transportation to Spanish America. Similarly, in the Philippines, vagrants and second-time deserters were usually impressed in the garrison of Manila, murderers were transported to the Royal Foundry of the same city and to the arsenal of Cavite, while bigamist and “sodomites” sentenced by the Inquisition were destined to the dangerous southern islands of the archipelago.

Convict Labour

Whereas exiled elite prisoners were not subjected to compulsory work, non-elite convicts were forced to work in the place of destination. Serving in the army and building and repairing the military infrastructures of the *presidios*, that is, the fortresses themselves, were their main occupations. Prisoners also performed other activities, such as cutting woods, transporting materials on boats, exploring unknown regions, and some of them were involved in skilled work as carpenters and blacksmiths. Many were additionally employed in (non-military) public works, especially in the urban centres, while agriculture was never a major occupational sector.

The conditions of work were highly differentiated across the empire and even within single locations. Impressments in the military exposed convicts to the risk of war and, even in time of peace, to being transported to isolated and potentially dangerous locations. Construction work was heavy, and was usually performed under strict military-like discipline. In some locations at least, convicts were also forced to wear shackles during work, which served both as a preventive measure

against the ever occurring escapes and as a symbolic reinforcement of punishment. However, under certain circumstances individual prisoners did experience relative upwards mobility, and sometimes voluntary stayed in the places they had been transported too.

Convict labour was thought as a way to make convicts “useful.” In some cases, an idea of “rehabilitation” through work, and thus transformation of criminals into productive subjects, was attached to this ubiquitous practice, under the influence of the Enlightenment. More pragmatically, many colonial officials viewed the exploitation of the prisoners’ workforce as an integral part of penal transportation and a convenient way to address labour shortages, to favour colonization of borderlands, and to limit expenses. The importance of these productive imperatives was such that it often impacted on convict routes, and even subverted the ideal correlation between crimes and destination: as a matter of fact, when the need arose to bolster the army on the eve of war, to rebuild the fortification after a military conflict and to colonise new territories, minor and more dangerous offenders, and military and non-military convicts were jointly transported to the related destinations.

The convicted workforce was usually less productive than other free and unfree labourers (free migrants, slaves, *corvée* workers, indebted native people, etc.) and considerable costs stemmed for the prisoners’ transportation, housing and sustenance. However, convict labour was generally not remunerated and therefore relatively cheaper than any other workforce; moreover, prisoners could be transported to different locations depending on labour needs, including those sites where virtually no other workforce existed, or would voluntarily migrated to. This comparative advantage in terms of flexibility means by no means that convicts passively accepted their fate. To the contrary, through frequent escapes, petitions, mutinies and other individual and collective strategies they constantly sought to better their working and living conditions, to change the destinations to which they were transported, and even to avoid transportation and punishment altogether.

Further Reading

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