

FORCED MIGRATION AND WORK IN EUROPEAN COLONIES

Forced Migrations and Labor in European Colonies

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ABSTRACT

Compelled labor assumes many forms, leading to both the recruitment of a local labor force and large-scale migratory movements. In the 17th-century, indentured Europeans in the colonies had accepted their indenture voluntarily, but most of them left to escape their difficult life conditions. In the 19th century, indentured Asian and African servants were transported to European colonies. That system, which was first developed in response to a shortage of laborers due to the abolitions of slavery, was pursued in another context in the 20th century. At that point, diverse forms of forced labor were being imposed on colonized people: *prestations* (statute labor) in French West Africa (AOF), working for concessionary companies in central Africa, etc. Deported prisoners and the European convicts sentenced to force labor in penal colonies can also be included. The fact that some of those laborers eventually settled in the places where they had been transported had not-insignificant consequences on the history of the “host” colonies.



Entrance to the Poulo Condore penal colony, in Indochina, 1895. Photograph by André Salles. Source : [Gallica/BnF](#)



Two inmates at the Poulo Condore penal colony: Trinh van De, 33, sentenced to 5 years for assaulting a superior officer; and Phan van Chan, 35, sentenced to 5 years for forgery. Photograph by André Salles. Source : [Gallica/BnF](#)



A Chinese coolie working on a tobacco plantation owned by the Amsterdam Deli Company, in Sumatra, c. 1900. Source : [Wikimedia](#)



Indentured man's indenture papers, 1901, Reunion Island Departmental Archives. Source : [Musée historique de Villèle](#)

According to Georges Debien, "In the beginning and even long after, all histories of colonization are histories of labor problems, of remote labor-recruitment problems." Whence my intention: to jointly examine forms of migration and of forced labor in European colonies since the discovery of the Americas. While those phenomena are often analyzed together, that is not always the case. Forms of compelled labor have existed outside of colonies: the "pawning" of workers in Ancient Greece and Africa, and in modern Europe; as well as certain forms of apprenticeship practiced in colonizing countries. Certain forms of forced labor have also existed, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, that led to limited population displacements within the continent, or even sometimes to work being performed locally. In addition, a great many population displacements related to seeking better working conditions have taken place voluntarily, including European emigrations to the New World and the Chinese and Indian diasporas in the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions.

The Difficulty of Establishing a Definition

At least three main categories of compelled labor existed in the colonies.

Coming before, or only shortly after, slavery, the various forms of indentured servitude have often been seen as slavery in disguise. Nonetheless, the contractual dimension causes a fundamental break, in legal terms, if not necessarily in practice. J.-F. Klein reminds us that the word *coolie* comes from the Tamil word *kuli*, meaning "salary," because although coolies may have been poorly paid, they were indeed employees, i.e. people working in conditions defined by a contract.

Concerning the indentured servitude of English, Scottish and Irish laborers that preceded the African slave trade, some authors, like Eric Williams, have written that, "White servitude was the historic base upon which Negro

slavery was constructed.” Hugh Tinker insists on the continuity between slavery and the Indian indentured servitude that followed abolition in various places. He describes that servitude as a “new system of slavery.” Other authors’ opinions are more nuanced. Pieter Emmer believes that after a first period of “lawless” indenture, there were more and more true volunteers, and that indenture sometimes did lead to forms of freedom for some individuals. The living conditions of indentured Indian women in the Caribbean is believed to have been better than in India.

We must also study the different types of forced labor involving local, colonized populations, which, despite their harshness, were still distinct from slavery because of both their temporary nature and the wages, albeit often token, that were associated with them. These can principally be found in Africa.

Lastly, different forms of forced labor with penal origins also existed. They were inflicted on convicts from colonizing countries who were then deported to the colonies.

The Contractual Labor of the Earliest Indentures

One early form of compelled labor, essentially during the 17th century, involved indentured European workers who were needed in order to derive profit from the colonies. There was a significant need for more laborers in the Caribbean, where the microbial shock and abuse stemming from the European conquest wiped out the native population. But that need was felt in other colonies, too, including Quebec.

The point, for the earliest colonial planters on the islands, was to find a workforce that was absolutely necessary, first to clear and then to farm their plantations. Those indentured workers were recruited to three-year contracts in the French colonies, and five-to-seven-year ones in British colonies. Indentured workers got free one-way transportation, and were paid in various ways that theoretically allowed them to pay for their own journey home. In the beginning, in the French colonies, the payout was 300 pounds of either tobacco or cotton.

Authors’ assessments of those workers’ living conditions vary: some of them describe indenture as slavery in all but name, others qualify that appraisal considerably. The truth is that although one can’t help but be struck by the terrible portrait painted by some observers, like Jean-Baptiste Labat, nor can one deny the success of some individual workers, who, when their indenture was over, were able to integrate local society and build comfortable situations for themselves. But how many people were overcome by the deplorable conditions compared to a few gratifying success stories?

Forced recruitment also occurred, but it was not the norm. Irish and Scottish rebels were deported by the British, and large convoys of convicts were sent as forced laborers in 1683-1688, at the instigation of Bégon. In charge of the Galères (Galley) Arsenal in Marseille, Bégon was, therefore, more than just the innocent introducer of the begonia to Europe. All manner of salt smugglers, men exempted from military service, small-time crooks, people recruited from prisons, hospitals and poorhouses (particularly women) and, especially in England, kidnapped

children, were forced into indentured servitude.

Most forced recruitments concerned people that Champlain described as *hommes gênés* (“hemmed in” or “entrapped” men), who had been convinced through recruitment agents’ blend of persuasion and sometimes misleading propaganda. They scoured the countryside, attending all manner of fairs, to find recruits. Nevertheless, no matter how great the colonizers’ need for laborers may have been, or how ready to oblige the authorities – who were pleased to be rid of “undesirable elements” – were, there was no systematic policy of forced indenture. Colbert, one of Louis XIV’s most important ministers, wrote, “Be persuaded that, however powerful he may be, it is not in the King’s power to populate the aforementioned colonies by force.”

A distinction should be made between the mass of indentured servants from rural areas, and the working-class aristocracy of skilled tradesmen: carpenters, coppersmiths, weavers, surgeon-dentists, etc. The first, forced to migrate by poverty, seemed to have been forced into unfair contracts and obliged to accept miserable living conditions. Many of them died before their contract had expired. Even those who were able to fulfill the terms then found themselves obliged to choose between remaining in an often-mediocre situation in the colony and struggling to return to their homeland, since the sums owed by their masters had often been partially received in the form of an advance, and already spent. If they stayed in the colony, they could sign a new indenture and/or farm a small patch of land for their own benefit, near the plantation where they had been indentured.

The second group, however, was able to negotiate contracts with much more favorable conditions. Once their contract was completed, they could return to their homes with a substantial capital, or set themselves up in business in the colony.

Indentures of Europeans trailed off in the late 17th century, due to the growing competition from more enslaved African workers. Although they were initially more expensive to purchase, over the long term they turned out to be more profitable than paying temporary contracts. In France, the phenomenon may have involved up to 400,000 workers. According to Debien, the money earned from that trade in the ports of France provided the capital for the slave trade.

European Prisoners’ Forced Labor

Deportations of prisoners and the work of European convicts in penal colonies came after the mid 18th century. While they can be explained by the determination to find inexpensive labor to make the colonies as profitable as possible, it also participated in a logic of repression: determination to purge continental nations of undesirable elements and to make criminals atone for the crimes they committed, as well, also, as a desire to eliminate political opponents.

André Zysberg insists on the continuity between galleys, created in the 18th century, on which some 4,000 people a year, on average, (first common criminals; then, after 1685, Protestants) were forced to row in brutal conditions,

and the other forms of forced labor that followed them. He wrote:

“That was how the greatest human compost heap in modern France ran for over three-quarters of a century. The system outlived the galleys. We see it in the labor camps of the latter half of the 18th century, the Restoration and the July monarchy, in the penal colony in Guyana during both the Second Empire and the Third Republic, these galley-slave-like conditions without actual galleys. [...] Slang in the penal colonies and forced-labor camps borrowed many words from the galley-rowers’ old language: *chiourme* (‘troublemaker’), *taulard* (‘convict’), *argousin* (‘cop,’ ‘rozzar’), *forçat* (‘someone sentenced to forced labor’). Those who were sentenced to forced labor were described as being ‘sent to the galleys,’ as though the convicts were still rowing phantom vessels.”

After 1748, those sentenced to row galleys were transferred to one of the three military arsenals - in Toulon, Brest, and Rochefort. In a hundred years, Toulon saw a hundred thousand convicts pass through its gates. Other labor camps were established later, and during the Consulate and the First Empire, their population quadrupled.

The Rochefort labor camp, created in 1757 and smaller than Toulon or Brest, still held a thousand convicts by circa 1830. Of the 25,000 convicts sent to Rochefort, 20,000 died before they were freed. Among them, one can name the father of the explorer René Caillié. Convicted in 1799 to twelve years in irons for the never-proven theft of two three-pound coins, he died in detention in 1808.

Convicts from the camps were made available to the arsenals’ ten thousand workers for difficult or dangerous tasks: they towed mast-less ships on the Charente River towards the Isle of Aix, where their masts were installed; they pulled the ropes on the boats that scooped mud of the Charente to keep it navigable; yoked to carts, they loaded ships, transported cannon and more; when ships were launched, the block was removed by a prisoner who was freed if he hadn’t been crushed...

Their contemporaries’ ideas about them is not unlike what people later thought about penal colonies. Let us quote just one philanthropist, Villermé. Impressed by the mortality rate among the convicts during his investigation in 1830, he wrote, “If there absolutely must be a large port in Rochefort [...] it would be preferable that the unhealthiest tasks required for the port’s maintenance be carried out by proven criminals rather than other workers [...] The death of a forced-laborer is far less regrettable than that of any other individual.”

The first deportations to French Guyana took place at the time of the French Revolution. They concerned: repeat offenders from 1791, clergymen who refused to vow allegiance to the nation and the king (1792) and victims of the Thermidorian repression who were sent to the “dry guillotine” (Billaud-Varenne, Collot d’Herbois).

Later on, the decision to have forced-labor sentences be performed overseas was taken by Napoleon III (transportation law of 1854), who commented, “Six thousand convicts locked up in our labor camps are putting a huge strain on the budget, becoming more and more corrupt, and constantly threatening society. It seems to me that it is possible to make a forced-labor sentence more effective, more moralizing, less costly, and more humane by taking advantage of the progress of French colonization.”

Since Guyana was considered too harsh at one point, due to the shockingly high mortality rate among convicts there, it was relieved by New Caledonia (1857-1886). Then in 1897, it became France's only penal colony once again. It is estimated that one hundred thousand convicts were transported to Guyana alone.

Penal colonies were also used to sideline political convicts, especially after the Paris Commune (Louise Michel, Jean Allemane, Henri Rochefort in New Caledonia) or those who were supposedly traitors (Alfred Dreyfus on Devil's Island, in Guyana). Common criminals were also sent there throughout the period. Repeat offenders were eliminated from continental France (1885 law relegating vagabonds and delinquents found to be *beyond redemption*). In Guyana, penal colonists' life expectancy was about the same as that in continental forced-labor camps or on galleys in the preceding periods, i.e. approximately six years. It did, however, vary depending on the site: camps in the forest had a far-more sinister reputation than other sites, like Kourou. Convicts who did their time and were freed, but were still exiled from continental France, stayed in Cayenne.

In 1923, the journalist Albert Londres denounced the system's inhumanity in an in-depth report. In 1938, President Lebrun put an end to transporting convicts. But those who were still serving time weren't brought back to continental France until 1953.

Nowadays, most authors consider that the repressive penal-colony systems resulted far more in "breaking human beings" than in developing Guyana. Dominique Kalifa's research describes the French Army's forced-labor camps in Algeria, where, during the Belle Époque, the number of *Biribi* - as convicted soldiers were known - reached nearly 2.1% of the entire French army. Disciplinary Saharan battalions were composed of "uncooperative elements."

In the United Kingdom, deportation of convicts was performed on a whole other scale than in France. Some were sent to America before Australia became the main destination. So 775 convicts debarked in New South Wales in 1786. Between 1788 and 1840, some 100,000 were transported to Australia.

Convicts were usually sentenced to either seven- or fourteen-year terms, and occasionally to life. When their sentence was up, they received a certificate of freedom: some went back to the United Kingdom, others stayed in Australia. Until Governor Richard Bourke's (1831-1837) reforms, which limited the number of convicts any one settler was allowed to employ to seventy, most convicts worked on settlers' farms, while the unruliest prisoners were put into chain gangs.

A parallel can be drawn between the use of forced-laborers in European colonies and using convicts for forced labor in the United States and Russia, which were then conquering their own territory. In the mythology of the Far West, outlaws and convict are common characters, along with sheriffs and cowboys. And some eleven thousand displaced forced-laborers, both political prisoners and common criminals, could be found in late-19th-century Siberia. In *The House of the Dead*, Dostoyevsky, who was among their number, wrote about the Siberian prison camps, "Man is a creature that can get accustomed to anything."

Colonized People's Forced Labor (late 19th-20th Centuries)

Colonial Africa had a population of just one hundred million inhabitants in 1900. So in an economy that had refused the option of slavery by then, the colonizers needed the contribution of Africans' labor to develop the territories.

Land status was the deciding factor in the choice of how to achieve that goal. In places where colonizers owned the land, the colonial nation could do without institutionalized forms of forced labor. Since Africans did not have the option of working land they owned, it was much easier to get them to work for colonizers or the colonial nation. In the South African Union, for example, only 12% of the land was allotted to the black population in the reserves. Therefore, in order to obtain resources to survive, black people had little choice but to work at wage-earning jobs. The economy's early orientation towards the mining and industrial sectors led to internal labor migrations, both within the South African Union and on the scale of the sub-continent. So this is an example of non-forced labor that nevertheless displays elements of being compelled. What's more, Black people's work was legally distinguished from "civilized work."

Although there were exceptions, especially prior to the 1920s, in their African "exploitation" colonies (i.e. not devoted to settlement), the British preferred local wage labor to forced labor, and/or they used indentured Indian coolies.

In French West Africa (AOF), where the population retained ownership of the land, the French colonial system was based on different types of obligation:

- required *prestations*, or statute labor, for work "in the public interest".
- intense fiscal pressure (capitation) compelling colonized peoples either to choose to grow cash crops for export themselves, or to raise cash by working for the colonizers.
- the colonizers organized forced labor migrations from relatively populous regions to those where a larger workforce was needed (e.g. from Mossi country in Upper Volta to logging sites and plantations of Lower Ivory Coast).

In French Equatorial Africa (AEF), as in the Belgian Congo in the early 20th century, the colonial nation delegated some of its roles to concessionary companies. Those companies exploited the population ruthlessly, especially early in that period, when they demanded large quantities of rubber and other export products.

The reality was more complex in Asia, whose demographics were already expanding rapidly. In British India, for instance, Indians retained ownership of their land, and forced labor was marginal: in the first half of the 19th century, forced labor on public-interest work sites, often in extremely harsh conditions, was imposed on vagabonds, prisoners and people at risk of famine (Alessandro Stanziani).

One can also mention the contracts for Bengal weavers who worked for the French East India Company in the 18th and 19th centuries. That work was chosen voluntarily, but the legal penalties for terminating a contract actually turned those weaving jobs into a kind of compelled labor. Their situation was quite exceptional however.

Indentured Servitude in 19th-20th Century European Colonies

Over a period of a little more than a hundred years, indentured servitude led to massive population transfers.

It is important to keep a few facts in the back of one's mind:

- Europeans' refusal to do unskilled work in subtropical colonies.
- Africa's persistent demographic fragility.
- Asia's demographic power: between them, in 1900, China and the Indian sub-continent represented a total of some six hundred million inhabitants, who were often forced into exile by poverty, while Europe had a total population of four hundred and twenty million people.

At first, the call for laborers came from sugar-cane plantations, where pioneering new areas were being put into production (e.g. Île Bourbon, after production collapsed in Saint Domingue, which became independent in 1809).

The 19th-century abolition of the slave trade, and of slavery, by European countries, led to labor shortages. Which is why during the transition period, planters obtained the establishment of a system of apprenticeship or *association*. Designed to keep freed slaves temporarily in place, it obliged them to continue to work for the same masters in conditions similar to slavery, but they were allotted a small plot of land they could farm for themselves. Between mistreatment by masters, former slaves' resistance, and abolitionists' mistrust, the system only lasted a few years. Nor did they continue to resort to indenturing in apprenticeship systems enslaved people grabbed off of illegal slave ships.

Later, the need for laborers was connected to the increasing expansion of colonial empires, which led to the development of new kinds of plantations. The huge plantations in Cochin-China, in French Indochina, depended on the labor of Annamite people from the north. On an entirely different scale, Indian and especially Chinese coolies were essential to the development of rubber farming in Malaysia. In addition, workers were needed to build infrastructure: the huge Indian rail network was built essentially by indentured laborers.

It is worth emphasizing the scope of the Indian and Chinese coolie arrangement. The Indian sub-continent exported laborers essentially to other countries in the British Empire, with numbers that reached, “from 1 to 2 million coolies” according to J.-F. Klein.

The first 19th-century indentures were arranged by private entrepreneurs, with highly debatable conditions. Wishing both to humanize the system and to increase the number of laborers recruited, Great Britain then decided to regulate Indian indenture conditions. This was done, notably, under the influence of the government-general and then the viceroyalty of India (1840-1878). The norm gradually evolved to a standard five-year contract that came with a round-trip ticket. And the employer had to make sure the subscriber understood the terms of the contract before signing it. The British government in India also developed some protective measures, e.g. the recruiting license, delivered by the collector; and the embarking permit, delivered to the ship captain.

Nevertheless, in 1920, the rise of Indian nationalism forced the United Kingdom to put a stop to indentured servitude. All the more so in that, at the same time, some imperial circles preferred to keep the population in place, for India’s own development.

After resorting to African indentured servitude from 1850 to 1859, beginning in 1860, France obtained authorization to import a large number of coolies from British India, particularly to Reunion Island.

China was undergoing violent internal convulsions (the Taiping Rebellion in the 1850 and 60s) and was growing ever more dependent on European powers (the Opium Wars with the United Kingdom). Until the eve of World War II, it remained essentially a reservoir of laborers.

Starting in the 1840s, Chinese coolies were recruited in conditions that were closer to abduction than to a contractual commitment: private recruitment agents kidnapped *suckling pigs* – as they were known – with the complicity of corrupt imperial civil servants (J.-F. Klein). After 1860, the government legalized those practices while also trying to regulate what until then had been carried out in a private, unregulated and often violent manner.

The filiations between diverse forms of compelled labor in European colonies has already been highlighted. So here, the emphasis will be on the consequences of the related population movements to the host colonies.

Nowadays, although some Australians descend from convicts, the local impact of penal-colony deportations on Guyana and New Caledonia seems much less noticeable. On the other hand, some forms of forced labor performed by colonized populations have had significant impacts: depopulation, flight, economic stagnation. As well as population transfers related to forced recruitment of laborers in AOF. And even the flight of some of those same populations to British colonies.

Nevertheless, population transfers related to indentured servitude will be the focus here. In the Caribbean and the Mascarenes, the immigration of indentured Asians, which came on top of the settlement of enslaved African

people, contributed to building a society that is both plural and segmented.

J.-F. Klein has identified several examples of explosive situations related to the introduction of foreign communities into Asian nations: seven million coolies from China were imported into British Malaysia, and approximately a third of them stayed there; by the same token, in Sumatra, the Dutch imported “millions of Indian and Chinese coolies” to work on and in “plantations and mines,” while the native inhabitants devoted themselves to “subsistence farming.” In Ceylon, Hindu Tamils are now confronting Buddhist Sinhalese.

If we add the members of the Indian and Chinese diasporas who migrated voluntarily to those engendered by those who settled where they had been indentured, we can measure the consequences of those huge population transfers. They remain all the more visible in that the communities are reluctant to mix with the local population.

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