

Introduction

Flight as Fight

Leo Lucassen and Lex Heerma van Voss¹

One evening in March 1760, three Bengal sailors, Dedaroe, Jadoe, and Pieroe, keeping guard in the port of Batavia (present-day Jakarta), noticed a man who suspiciously hid his face with a piece of cloth while navigating past them. They asked the passenger of the vessel to identify himself and recognized him as a fellow sailor from Bengal, Baboe. Baboe had been in the service of the Dutch East India Company, but had deserted his work on the Batavia wharf. He had survived for a year and a half by performing wage labor in Batavia. In the town he had met another Bengal, Alladie, who served as a boatswain on the English vessel *Pocock*. Alladie had engaged Baboe to work on the *Pocock*, and he was now trying to smuggle his new hire aboard ship. The Dutch authorities had Alladie whipped and banned from Batavia for his role in the attempted desertion. As a Company servant under Dutch law, Baboe thus escaped severe, possibly capital punishment. He was sentenced to two years of forced labor in the ropewalk on the Island Edam off the coast of Java.²

We hear Baboe's voice only through the documents produced in the Courts of the Dutch, and we do not know why he absconded from his work at the wharf. Something in his living and working conditions made him decide that he would be better off outside the orbit of the Dutch company. He actually ran away from a hospital for "Moorish" workers, and the reason he was hospitalized may have shaped his decision. He managed to hide and survive in Dutch Batavia, doing what was described as "coolie" work. The Dutch and the English alike were short on hands, and Alladie was able to offer Baboe a monthly wage close to the level usual for European sailors. By sentencing Baboe to convict labor, the colonial authorities killed two birds with one stone: his punishment relieved the labor shortage of the Company.

Because of labor shortages in their far-flung colonial empires, all European colonial powers resorted to harsh discipline in recruiting and retaining workers. This was true for nominally free wage workers, like many sailors and soldiers, who signed on for a considerable time period and were not allowed to leave their jobs. It was by definition true for unfree workers like convicts and enslaved workers. Often, as in Baboe's case, the available sources were written by the oppressors, offering no clues as to the motives of the runaway, nor about the network he used to survive for a year and a half in a foreign town. Other workers, like Alladie, with similar backgrounds and positions, might have helped him. But the department of Dedaroe, Jadoe, and Pieroe shows that this need not necessarily be the case. Even if we lack these details, it is clear that Baboe put much at stake by running away, risking harsh punishment and surviving in the urban jungle of Batavia. We can safely qualify his flight as part of a fight against oppression.

The establishment of European empires and the rise of capitalism around the globe beginning in the sixteenth century constitute the backdrop and essential contexts for this volume. Imperial expansion was a Herculean task; it required many kinds of work—the production of commodities for trade, such as sugar, tobacco, and spices; the movement of riverine boats and transoceanic vessels connecting ports with vast hinterlands; and the maintenance of factories and forts and military labor to safeguard imperial possessions. The nascent system of global capitalism required that workers from Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Africa be mobilized in ways that were novel, cooperative, and systemic. Over the early modern era, the slaves, servants, convicts, soldiers, and sailors who made the new global economy possible numbered in the millions.

Comparing and connecting the Portuguese, British, Danish, Dutch, French, Mughal, and American empires, the essays that follow demonstrate how trading settlements and networks, military expeditions, and plantation societies were built and maintained, requiring many varieties and vast quantities of labor.³ The carriers, fighters, and builders crucial to these imperial projects were mobilized through a wide range of strategies, all of them entailing significant constraint and coercion. As capitalists and imperial planners organized the global cooperation of their workers they discovered that these workers sometimes translated that cooperation into projects of their own. In short, they resisted.

At the heart of a new imperial and capitalist order lay the vexed and contested issue of workers' mobility. No matter where global workers originated, no matter what labors they did, and no matter where they did them, large numbers of them ran away from their employers. In response empire builders created rules, regulations, laws, and treaties around the world, from the Atlantic to the Indian and Pacific Oceans, to criminalize running away and to make sure that mobility served business and state interests. They implemented a wide range of violent, terror-filled punishments designed to limit mobility to prescribed circuits.

Yet the lack of complete political power (in India, for example) and the issue of labor scarcity in many parts of the world (the Americas, especially) made it difficult to enforce the regulations of worker mobility. European sailors and soldiers entering Bengal's labor market quickly adopted the practice of floating around from one employer to another. Likewise in Europe, soldiers working in Denmark came from Norway and Iceland. Even in mature colonies, running away from work remained a more or less continuous threat. In the convict colony of Australia, special prisons were erected for "absconding" convicts, who repeatedly undermined colonial objectives. Employers and states in turn experimented with more totalizing forms of surveillance and confinement globally, in the process transforming not only their colonies but their metropolises as well.

Between 1600 and 1850 the entwined processes of imperial expansion and capitalist commercialization took many forms and created multiple labor regimes around the world. Timothy Coates describes deserters and runaways in three different parts of the Portuguese empire. Titas Chakraborty examines English and Dutch imperial expansion into Bengal, where East India trading companies mobilized native and European laborers on a mass scale to produce and transport silk textiles, saltpeter, opium, and tea. Matthias van Rossum explores how the Dutch East India Company mobilized a mixed, multi-ethnic labor regime of enslaved, *corvée*, and waged workers across the lands and seas of Asia. Timothy Coates, Johan Heinsen, James Dator, and Anita Rupprecht show how Portuguese, Danish, French, and English imperial planners built plantation colonies based on the combined work of European convicts and indentured servants as well as African slaves and, later, "liberated" apprentices. Yevan Terrien analyzes the geopolitically important military/agricultural outpost of early French colonial Louisiana, which depended on a mixture of enslaved and waged workers to support the rich sugar colonies in the Caribbean. Nicole Ulrich studies the mobile crew of European and indigenous servants, slaves, soldiers, and sailors in the Cape of Good Hope under Dutch rule in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Jesse Olsavsky and Mary Mitchell treat slavery and runaways in the nineteenth-century U.S. "empire of cotton," which grew from massive land purchases, Indian removal, and imperial war to become a mature and hugely profitable plantation system. Hamish Maxwell-Stewart and Michael Quinlan present the history of labor and desertion in the Australian colony of Tasmania, which was practically "an open air panopticon" for captive, convict labor.

Who were these workers? Most of them were the vanquished, victims of expropriation of one kind or another in their native lands, who were thrown onto the roads and ways and eventually ships, often bound for far-flung colonies. Indentured servants arrived in the Leeward Islands from Nantes, Dublin, and London after expulsion from their home economies. Many of the indentured Europeans and all of the enslaved Africans were captive, stolen people, who had lost control

not only over their means of living but also their bodies. Convicts and *corvée* workers came from Europe and Asia to labor for Danish and Dutch overseas companies in the East and West Indies. Convict labor often led to wage labor: criminals in French prisons were packed off as soldiers to colonial Louisiana. Danish convicts had their alienation inscribed on their foreheads; such branded “thief marks” formally excluded them and their children from Danish society. Even free wage laborers such as European sailors and soldiers were set in motion under conditions of coercion through conscription and violent discipline. Many of these workers had been peasants and artisans who lost their land, tools, and skills. Forced movement was a means of creating and imposing social control within a global accumulation of capital.

Although workers had come to the colonies by different routes, the use of fast feet created common experiences. Slaves, servants, and waged workers often found themselves cooperating on the same work sites. Some continued their cooperation subversively when they absconded. Running away could turn slaves into sailors, and soldiers into peasants. They frequently formed motley crews: Johannes Kodij, Maart from Bengal, Imandie from Naoer, Poese de Rozairo from Mozambique, Mira Kaffier from Madras, and Gregorius Jeremias from Oejang Sala all served under Captain Scott on a vessel en route to Malacca in March 1784. Desertion enabled such workers to scramble the neat categories of the global social division of labor and indeed to challenge them. The struggle over mobility was a potentially unifying experience.

Why, in the face of extreme punishments, did workers run, repeatedly and collectively? Running away was intimately linked to ideas of improving one’s life by regaining some measure of control over the body, labor, and subsistence. Perhaps the most common reason for running away was dissatisfaction with working conditions. Grueling labor at sea or ashore drove sailors and soldiers in Louisiana, Indonesia, and Australia to fly from their masters. The super-exploitation of enslaved people in the Americas propelled runaways to inaccessible, defensible places where they built independent maroon communities. Others escaped aboard deep-sea vessels in what N. A. T. Hall called “maritime marronage.”⁴

How to improve one’s life depended on a worker’s objectives and options. A major motivation of runaways was to form or renew family ties that had been torn asunder by forced labor. In the Cape Colony, Adam, a slave, had to run away to form his family with a Khoesan woman, Jannetje, and their son April. Tom, a liberated African from Tortola, assisted his wife, Jane, to run away as he could not bear her suffering at the hands of her employer. On reaching Mobile on the Gulf coast of North America, French soldiers complained that they came to the region to “settle down” as skilled workers, not to perform military drudgery. Other workers simply wanted more control over their time. *Corvée* workers in Dutch Ceylon ran away to protest the lengthening of the workday throughout the eighteenth century. Bondspeople in New Orleans temporarily escaped in and around the city to take time off

from work, as did convicts in Van Diemen's Land. Soldiers and sailors ran away from work and "straggled" across town and country almost everywhere they were stationed. The struggle over time was nearly universal among coerced workers.

Some decisions to run depended on understanding the value of labor and its geopolitical setting. When "liberated" Africans were given menial jobs as apprentices, they ran away, knowing that skilled work would improve both their material lives and social status. Similarly, European sailors and soldiers frequently absconded to the armies of local and imperial elites in Mughal India, escaping the lowest positions in the company hierarchy and turning their martial skills in ordnance into higher wages. Both Irish indentured servants and enslaved Africans used their knowledge of the physical and political geography of the plantation regime in the early eighteenth-century Leeward Islands to play French and British colonial authorities against each other. French authorities were forced to promise runaway slaves "very pleasing and easy servitude" to avert desertion to their imperial enemies.

Running away has sometimes been presented by historians as an "individualist" form of resistance, to be contrasted with "collective" struggle epitomized in insurrection. The essays of this volume contradict this facile binary. First of all, most deserters ran away in groups, many of them repeatedly.⁵ Some, like the Danish convicts Peder Vognmand and Jens Pedersen, left behind a trail of documentation that explained their every move. Even individual runaways depended on collective networks to make their way toward freedom. Frederick, an African apprentice in Tortola, made it to St. Thomas with the help of a free black woman, Sally Keys, "known for her sympathy towards the apprentices." Those who had experience in desertion encouraged others: runaways who returned to French Guadeloupe after three years' absence "encouraged" another desertion of six people a few years later.

Running produced innovation from above. Joint escapes sometimes encouraged imperial and class authorities to introduce new racial categories to divide them. Christopher Codrington, governor of the English Leeward Islands, proposed to "solve" the problem of desertion by decreasing the influx of white landless servants from Europe and building a racialized plantation regime based on the labor of enslaved Africans. They too of course ran away, but now poor, free whites were paid to catch and return them. This new "racial contract between the big planters, the small farmers, and the landless white laborers," writes James Dator, "offered a psychological wage large enough to reinforce the ideology of containment."

Deserters repeatedly shaped crises of sovereignty by creating and exploiting interimperial competition. Runaways in Louisiana and the Danish West Indies took advantage of the weaknesses of imperial control and fled the colonial settlement. Asian workers played one company against another, deserting here and there for better wages and privileges. Indentured servants in the Caribbean deserted from one empire to another, and runaway slaves formed maroon communities that initially challenged the colonial order and then gained a modicum of

independence from it. In the United States slaves deserted to the north and helped abolitionists both to resist and critique American imperial expansion.

Desertion also contributed to the transformation of labor regimes in both colonies and modern states. Uncontrollable running essentially forced the Danish West India Company to abandon convict labor in St. Thomas and to initiate a transition toward full dependence on enslaved workers. Similarly, in the Leeward Islands, desertion pushed planters to decrease their employment of indentured servants and to shift their labor investment toward African slaves—who themselves created new headaches for their bosses by running away. In French Louisiana and precolonial Bengal, footloose workers shaped the relationship between European powers and indigenous polities. In Tortola the desertion of workers created frictions between the interests of local planters and metropolitan imperial planners, guiding how the latter conceptualized and implemented abolition. Runaway slaves from the American South educated abolitionist Vigilance Committees and the larger antislavery movement in the North, helping to create both the theory and the practice of abolition and finally creating a crisis that would lead to the Civil War. In this explosive situation the actions of runaways were genuinely revolutionary.

The essays in this volume seek to answer seven questions:

1. What were the causes of desertion? (in each specific time and place of study)
2. What is the “political economy of desertion”?
3. What kinds of knowledge made desertion possible?
4. How did workers understand and justify their mobility?
5. What has been the impact and historical significance of desertion / mobility?
6. How is desertion (and the diversity of deserters) related to class formation?
7. How is desertion related to other forms of resistance and class struggle?

Given the scarcity of sources, it is obviously not always possible to answer all of these questions in every case. The remainder of this introduction will formulate more general observations while placing the theme, period, and regions under study in a broader temporal, geographical, and theoretical frame.

CAPITALISM AND GLOBAL EMPIRES

This volume explores running away in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean regions during the first round of globalization, roughly the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, as a new kind of empire developed. Previous empires, even if they sometimes had overseas colonies, were primarily landed. The new empires consisted of a European metropolitan country and a string of dispersed colonies and trading posts, which often needed military and naval defense.⁶ These empires were formed by the main seafaring states of Western Europe, and usually included

Caribbean or American colonies to produce silver, sugar, and tobacco and Asian strongpoints to supply the home market with spices, cotton, silk, porcelain, coffee and tea. Trade between Asia and Europe increased twenty-five-fold between the early sixteenth and late eighteenth centuries, and the trade between Europe and the Americas even more so.⁷

Vast armies of workers were needed to produce raw materials and goods for European markets. In India and China relatively strong states usually enabled local traders, producers, and workers to profit from European demand. Elsewhere in Asia and the Americas the European states and mercantile companies established a more direct rule and often forced local workers or free or unfree workers brought from elsewhere to produce the goods. Free workers were not easily convinced to take up these jobs as colonies were considered dangerous and unhealthy. If local labor was unavailable, the colonial empires resorted to unfree labor, bringing in convicts or enslaved workers. Many of the capitalist empires therefore included one or more African posts or colonies to procure enslaved Africans to work the plantations in the Americas.

Sailors, soldiers, indentured servants, convicts, and enslaved workers were crucial to make this global merchant capitalism work. The first two groups were male. The majority of indentured servants and convicts and the majority of the enslaved transported across the Atlantic were male, but over time a more even sexual balance resulted in slave communities.⁸ As Hamish Maxwell-Stewart and Michael Quinlan note in their essay, more than four times as many men were transported as convicts to Australia than women. All in all, men made up the bulk of the deserters discussed in this volume. But Maxwell-Stewart and Quinlan also point out that, proportionally, female convicts were a bit more likely to be posted missing than male. Convict and slave runaways included both men and women.

LABOR HISTORY

As Van Rossum and Kamp state: “Mobility and desertion must be seen as integral parts of workers’ strategies, part of repertoires of individual and collective acts, ranging from obedience and career making to strikes and mutinies. Desertion is crucial in this respect as it was not only a rejection of one’s work and working conditions, but was also related to finding a better future, lying either in a new employment elsewhere, or in alternative ways of livelihood.”⁹ Within labor history, the decision of workers to withdraw their labor from their employers is an obvious tactic of resistance, employed in strikes. In the situations described in this volume, the power of the employers was so great that workers had to desert surreptitiously. They left not only the workplace, but also their communities, thereby becoming migrants.

Yet not all deserters aimed to burn their bridges. Hirschman’s voice-exit typology can be used to categorize the types of desertion and running away.¹⁰

1. Bending and breaking the rules (acquiescence / voice);
2. Renegotiating labor conditions (voice);
3. Escaping from labor relations (exit).

Breaking the rules was running away with the aim to extend one's personal freedom without questioning the coerced labor relation as such. The runaway did not necessarily accept the labor system but considered the consequences of a more principled opposition (voice, exit) too grave. The many forms of "petit marronage" fit in this category. Absconding to visit one's relatives who lived on another plantation and returning after a few days, or escaping the brutal conditions of plantations for a brief time, were part of a wider repertoire of resistance and mobility. This phenomenon fits within a much longer tradition, for example the celebration of "blue Monday" by artisanal and industrial workers.¹¹ Somewhat similar was the temporary (and seasonal) exit of Russian peasants (*Otchotniki*), who combined work for their lord with wage labor in cities. In the first half of the nineteenth century some 136,000 in Moscow and 228,000 in St Petersburg—almost half the population—made such seasonal exits.¹² Many lords disliked the practice but were forced to give in, even though they required the workers to pay for internal passports and to leave their relatives as collateral. Such forms of agency could be a first step toward a more fundamental opposition to slavery or other forms of coerced labor.

Renegotiating labor conditions was running away to find a better deal elsewhere or to force employers to change the conditions of the existing working or contractual conditions.¹³ Threatening to desert or actually doing so was sometimes a strategy to force employers to improve labor conditions and raise pay without fundamentally changing the labor relation as such. Rediker, for example, showed how in the early modern Atlantic maritime workers took advantage of labor shortages to "renegotiate" their service contract through desertion.¹⁴ These types of desertion were part of the broader process of individual and collective bargaining.¹⁵

It seems no coincidence that desertion among sailors emerged as a strategy alongside the introduction of wage labor in the late medieval Mediterranean, where between 1250 and 1350 "owner-captains" negotiated sailors' wages as traditional, personal bonds between capital and labor broke down in medieval shipping. Only then did desertion from merchant ships become a significant problem in ports such as Venice, Genoa, and Pisa. Merchants offered sailors advance pay in order to procure labor and limit turnover. But sailors took the advance wages and tried to disappear into the increasingly anonymous ports of the later Middle Ages.¹⁶ Shipowners fought back by employing professional agents to capture and return the sailors. Soldiers also deserted to get a better deal by enrolling again in another regiment of the same army. This was quite common in eighteenth-century Europe, for example during the Austrian War of Succession (1740–48), when

illegal reenrollment was called “billardage,” and those who did so illegally were known as “rouleurs.”¹⁷

Escaping from labor relations altogether involved leaving one’s cultural zone and explicitly linked running away to social change.¹⁸ We can link this exit option to a classification of three modes of labor relations as developed by the International Institute of Social History.¹⁹

1. Escaping tributary labor relations (serfs, soldiers, convicts)
2. Escaping temporary coerced commodified labor relations (soldiers, sailors, servants, apprentices)
3. Escaping permanently coerced commodified labor relations (slaves)

Escaping tributary labor was not limited to convicts who populate the chapters by Heinsen and Maxwell-Stewart and Quinlan.²⁰ It includes people sentenced to (heavy) labor in faraway penal colonies for very long periods or for life, such as Van Diemen’s Land and Andaman Islands (Britain), Guiana and New Caledonia (France), Siberia (Russia), Angola and Mozambique (Portugal), and other colonies.²¹ It also includes peasants who since at least the early Middle Ages ran away in large numbers to cities to avoid *corvée* labor. Only when feudalism waned in Western Europe in the fifteenth century did this type of running away dwindle. Between 1727–42 some 325,000 Russian serfs headed to sparsely settled lands in the Kazan and Voronezh provinces to the East and the South, where they set themselves up as state peasants with families and sometimes entire villages.²² The number of fugitives swelled in the nineteenth century, when Siberia became a popular destination. State officials in the South and the East welcomed runaway peasants in the southern steppes and in Siberia until well into the eighteenth century, showing how the interests of the nobility and the state could diverge.²³

Others who tried to escape tributary labor were men whose military service was a form of *corvée*. This phenomenon had deep roots throughout Eurasia and Africa. In contrast to mercenaries, many states forced men into military service. Although conscription only became widespread after the French Revolution,²⁴ earlier forms of obligatory military service fit the tributary labor relation model: “The precise form that the tributary labor relationship takes can vary from legal enslavement (as in the Ottoman *devşirme*) to levies for specific campaigns, hereditary obligations (as in the case of the Ming where households were obliged to provide one member of the household for military service instead of *corvée* or tax obligations) and early and modern forms of conscription.”²⁵

Feudal military mobilization was especially widespread in the early modern period and before, ranging from the French *milice royale*,²⁶ to the Ottoman *timar* system and the German and Habsburg *Wehrbauer* to Russian Cossacks.²⁷ In many parts of the world, like India, China, and the Middle East, military service mixed tributary service, mercenary work, and slavery.²⁸ Perquisites and privileges deterred

some military workers from running away—for example, the elite Turkish slaves in the Ghulam/Mamluk in the Abbasid Caliphate from the ninth century onward.²⁹ But among other segments of the army, especially the draftees and pressed soldiers, running away was endemic.³⁰

Fleeing the army or the navy without consent almost always involved migrations beyond cultural boundaries. Desertion and draft dodging in France during the French Revolution was common and involved hundreds of thousands of men, many of whom moved to other cities or polities, thereby changing their legal status.³¹ Many deserters found employment in local French industries, or organized themselves as bands of woodcutters and quarrymen. Others went to ports like Bordeaux, hoping to escape to the colonies or the United States.³² Many fled to other polities that had ideological, (geo)political, or military reasons to welcome them, as when soldiers conscripted in eighteenth-century Habsburg army deserted to the Ottoman empire.³³

As numerous contributors to this volume make clear,³⁴ commodified labor in many parts of the world, including Europe, was until the nineteenth century organized through various sorts of contracts that tied workers to employers. In Western Europe this goes back to the English *Ordinance of Labourers* (1351), which included penalties for workers who departed their workplace prematurely.³⁵ Although people in principle entered labor contracts freely, they could not leave without permission until the contract expired, which added the element of force to the labor relation.³⁶ How many broke their contracts and left prematurely, and where they ran to, has not been systematically studied. Yet it is clear that soldiers, sailors, and domestic workers, many of whom were pressed into service one way or another, ran away in great numbers.³⁷ Their labor conditions were often bad, pay was low, and (corporal) punishments were more the rule than the exception. This was true for many parts of the world including eighteenth-century North America, where in 1759 Benjamin Franklin remarked that the majority of labor was performed by “indentured servants brought from Great Britain.”³⁸ Many of them absconded after receiving a recruiter’s “farthing,” often soon after landing in the colonies, or jumping ship after having left an English port.³⁹

Rates of desertion among soldiers and sailors in the early modern period varied. The rate in German armies in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was between five and fifty percent,⁴⁰ whereas the Dutch Republic had a staggering high level of 40 percent at the end of the eighteenth century.⁴¹ Given the risk of punishment many soldiers absconded to other polities, like the French soldiers who ran to territories of the Holy Roman Empire or the Dutch Republic.⁴² Runaways who crossed not only a political but also a religious border could increase their welcome when they converted. A good example was the siege of Eger (present-day Hungary) by the Ottomans in 1596, when 250 Christian soldiers fled to the Ottoman empire “and became Turk,” just like 500 Walloon soldiers did four

years later.⁴³ Sailors in service of the European East India companies were less inclined to abscond. Mutinies occurred regularly aboard European ships in Asia, but these were perhaps limited by fewer options to flee within Asia.⁴⁴

Finally we arrive at those people who had the best reason to escape, because they had been enslaved against their will, most of them with slim chances of ever being freed again. The most extreme example were chattel slaves whose descendants inherited their oppressed condition. Their rate of escape depended on geography and other circumstances, but as conditions were appalling and discipline brutal, many did try to run away. Their owners therefore did everything they could to prevent their escape, not only because they had invested heavily in “human capital,” but also because runaways undermined the legitimacy of the slave system and enticed others to follow their example. The chapters by Mitchell, Oslavsky, Dator, and Ulrich, on the U.S. South, the Caribbean, and the Cape Colony in South Africa, illuminate the runaway practices of enslaved Africans who were brought against their will to the Americas or who were forcefully moved within Africa.

Slaves left plantations, or farms, planning to settle permanently in areas where the slave regime had limited access, such as swamps, hills, and forests, or the borderlands of the Cape Colony. Sometimes colonial rulers accepted this *grand maroonage* and recognized maroon communities through treaties.⁴⁵ Powerful maroon communities developed in Jamaica, Brazil, and Suriname, but much less so in the U.S. South.⁴⁶ Another form of escaping slavery was to flee to other polities, often overseas. The most obvious destinations were states where slavery was abolished, like Mexico in 1824,⁴⁷ English territories in the Caribbean after 1838, then France in 1848, and finally Canada.

States that had institutionalized slavery could also offer runaway slaves protection, as for example in New Spain in the eighteenth century. Spanish colonial rulers in what is now Venezuela and Mexico welcomed former slaves as new settlers in thinly populated parts of the empire, not unlike rulers of Russian peripheries had done in Tsarist Siberia. Ex-slaves who converted to Catholicism became especially effective “agents of empire.”⁴⁸ These groups of runaways could also include European indentured servants, as in Barbados in the middle of the seventeenth century (“several Irish servants and negroes”) and eighteenth-century Virginia.⁴⁹ Ethnically mixed groups of runaways also formed communities in Asia and South Africa.⁵⁰

By far the best-known example of fleeing to another polity is the “underground railroad” by which southern U.S. slaves, helped by free blacks and whites who principally opposed slavery, were smuggled to Northern states and Canada in the nineteenth century.⁵¹ The numbers are uncertain, but may amount to 100,000,⁵² of whom some 30,000 reached Canada.⁵³ Although we have no good quantitative evidence, scholars estimate that the numbers of runaways who remained in the South were much larger than those who escaped to the North or to Mexico.⁵⁴ By far most of them took to cities in the South where they hoped to blend in with the

existing communities of free blacks.⁵⁵ Even on small Caribbean slave islands, cities functioned as places of refuge, as on the Danish island of St. Croix, with small cities such as Christiansted, Frederiksted, and Charlotte Amalie, where free blacks but also poor whites hid runaway slaves.⁵⁶

Much less is known about runaway slaves in other parts of the world, like Africa and Asia. We have some indications that slaves in Africa, or those being threatened by slave raiders, fled to territories where African rulers could not reach them, but the possibility of “fleeing the state”⁵⁷ seems to have been limited.⁵⁸ More is known about enslaved sailors, soldiers, and commoners in the early modern Mediterranean. Due to the scarcity of rowers for the galleys and the constant frictions between Christian and Muslim polities, slave raiding by both sides was common practice after the late Middle Ages.⁵⁹ This included, on the Christian side, vagrants and gypsies who were caught in German and French states and sold as rowers to city states like Venice, Rovereto, and Genoa.⁶⁰ In total in the period 1500–1800 slave raiders may have taken a million Europeans, more than half a million North African Muslims, and 375,000 African slaves to Spain and Portugal to work on sugar plantations in the Mediterranean and the Canary Islands.⁶¹ Many of these captives were released after ransoms were paid, or were freed by force. How many ran away is unclear.

Table 0.1 shows that the causes for running away boil down to dissatisfaction with coercion, prevailing labor relations, and pay and work conditions. Whether people ran away depended on a mix of concerns, ranging from (political or natural) geography (was there a viable place to run to?), to knowledge and networks, to the force of the punitive regime and its disciplining effects. The motivations to run determined the form of running away. In situations without obvious places to escape to, and where workers were in no position to bargain, *breaking the rules* within the dominant coercive labor relation was the only option. People often disobeyed the rules despite the prospect of harsh punishments. There are ample indications that breaking the rules was motivated by a sense of injustice and the wish to reestablish some sort of autonomy.

The transition from breaking the rules to running away as a *negotiating* strategy was gradual and depended on the bargaining power of the workers involved. When labor or skills were scarce and employers had no immediate alternative, workers often used desertion as a weapon to negotiate better terms. Their action did not change the labor system as such, but it did stimulate class (or at least occupational-group) consciousness and established the limits of the employer’s disciplinary power. Some runaways would develop a more radical approach that could lead to *escape* with no intention to return, to move toward a new polity with more favorable labor conditions or to join a maroon society. Escaping could—and often did—result in new labor relations, such as self-employment or freer forms of wage labor.

TABLE 0.1 The relationship between forms of running away and the seven leading questions of this volume.

	Causes	Political Economy	Knowledge	Workers' Justification	Impact	Class Formation	Class Struggle
Bending and Breaking the Rules	Dissatisfaction with prevailing labor relations	Coerced labor relations	Collective knowledge about limits of opposition	Reaction to violations of the moral economy and feelings of injustice	<i>Low</i>	Mainly leaves the status quo intact	Virtually absent
Renegotiating	Dissatisfaction with pay and work conditions	Rising impact of commodified labor	Geographical and labor market knowledge	Conscious bargaining strategy	<i>Medium</i>	Increased class consciousness	Shows that class struggles long predated the industrial era
Escaping	Resistance against social control and (extreme) coercion	Varies from patriarchy to chattel slavery	Geographical and political-economic knowledge	From individual motives to better one's live to collective resistance against extreme coercion	<i>Large</i> Due to erosion of: (1) prevailing family systems; (2) labor relations	Can lead to new class formations (wage labor, self-employment)	May take the form of class struggle but not necessarily so

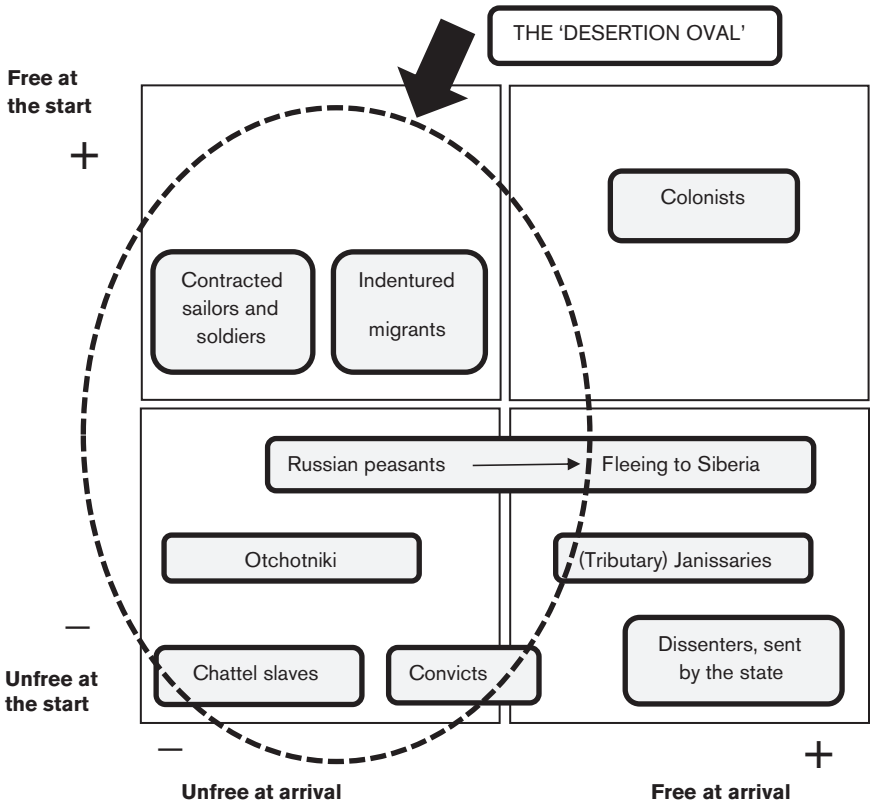


FIGURE 0.1. Desertion Oval.

The greater the coercion workers faced, the greater their likelihood of looking for alternatives and voting with their feet. Yet this was only possible if they had the necessary knowledge and alternatives. The “Desertion Oval” in Figure 0.1 shows that the phenomenon of running away was largely limited to labor relations in which migrants were bonded at the source of their work, with chattel slavery as the strongest example.

Yet not all deserters were unfree at their origin and at destination: indentured servants, soldiers, and sailors were also likely to run away. Being unfree at the origin, however, did not necessarily lead to escape. Bonded migrants who were offered a privileged position at destination, even if they formally remained slaves, lacked the incentive to leave. For most of them the trade-off was acceptable. The formerly Christian Janissaries in the Ottoman empire and Russian religious dissenters in the nineteenth century exemplify the point.

MIGRATION HISTORY

The history of desertion must be connected to the blossoming field of migration history. Although the transportation of slaves, and to some extent that of soldiers and sailors, has been the subject of increasing interest among historians of migration,⁶² what happened after arrival, or during the time that these migrants navigated the colonial circuit, has not been a topic of systematic study. Migration and mobility as forms of resistance, linked to forced labor, however, has a long history, reaching back—at least—to the Babylonian empire.⁶³ This is not surprising since forced labor has been common throughout history. Today people continue to migrate to escape oppressive labor relations, such as the Eritreans who are pressed into military service at home or indigenous Guatemalans facing labor demands by the state.⁶⁴ Geographical mobility has long been central to escaping repressive labor relations.

This point is well illustrated by Linda Rupert in her work on marronage from the Dutch island of Curaçao to the “Tierra Firme” of the Spanish empire. She writes, “The stories of these intrepid individuals require us to rethink the traditional narrative of marronage. As dozens of cases in the Venezuelan archives attest, these immigrants were as much running towards something known and attractive—the promise of legal freedom, land, and economic opportunities—as they were fleeing away from an oppressive slave society. Like immigrants throughout history, their journeys were based on calculated, carefully informed decisions.”⁶⁵

Rupert reconstructed the patterns and mechanisms of running away of almost 600 slaves from Curaçao to what is now Venezuela, between 1729 and 1774, as part of a much larger emigration. By 1720 already some 20,000 maritime maroons from Dutch, Danish, and Caribbean plantation islands had fled to the mainland. Until the end of the eighteenth century the Spanish imperial rulers welcomed them, especially if they converted to Catholicism, settled in sparsely populated regions, and thus acted as agents of empire. This strategy of the Spanish colonial authorities was also implemented in Puerto Rico toward runaways from the Danish Caribbean island of St. Croix and for slaves who escaped from South Carolina to Spanish Florida in the eighteenth century.⁶⁶

Mainstream migration historians—who limit themselves largely to international mobility and to free self-deciding individuals—have paid little attention to these movements. Unfree movers, like slaves and convicts, but also those who more or less freely entered labor contracts, like sailors and soldiers, as well as other “organizational migrants,” are often left out of the picture.⁶⁷ Their subsequent position as (oppressive) agents of empire further bolsters their exclusion from the field.⁶⁸

In order to analyze running away as a form of migration it is necessary to go beyond the modernist and Eurocentric definition of the phenomenon. Since the 1980s many scholars have criticized the “tyranny du national”⁶⁹ and pointed at the