

Runaways: Desertion and Mobility in Global Labor History, c. 1650-1850

22-23 October 2015, Amsterdam

Call for Papers

International Institute of Social History
Department of History, University of Pittsburgh

Early modern globalization depended on the mobility and work of millions of workers who were crucial to production, transport, protection, and warfare. Bound by contract, slavery or otherwise, most of the labour relations through which sailors, soldiers, craftsmen, convicts and slaves were mobilized and employed contained elements in which withdrawal from the labour relation was a punishable offence. Though the lives of the working people were ordained by powerful trading companies and state structures, these workers often tried to pursue their own social and economic interests. Walking away from work, often breaching contract or law, was a widespread phenomenon that had a crucial role in this early stage of globalization.

‘Desertion’ – as understood by authorities – was absence from work: a breach of a labor contract or an act of defiance. For this conference, we define desertion broadly (and is thus not limited to the military sphere) as ‘walking away from work where this was a punishable offence in labour relations underpinned by contracts, obligations or coercion’. It will compare different types of workers. The conference will also explicitly engage with perspectives ‘from below’. Walking away from work was perhaps the most common of all forms of quotidian acts of disobedience amongst the early modern workforce. The study of desertion provides information on the workers’ perception of economic opportunity, conditions of work, strategies of revolt and finally, how these practices among workers shaped the (much larger) history of empire and capitalism in the early modern period.

Desertion of workers thus provides an interesting perspective on early global connections. The mobility and boldness of deserting workers is not surprising. Throughout the world, a vast majority of them were often migrants. From this perspective, desertion can be related to the work place, labour conditions and workers strategies, but also to the opportunities offered by economic and political environments, varying from ‘open’ and ‘empty’ landscapes offering opportunities for settlement and freedom, to ‘urban’ and economically developed areas providing opportunities for (new) work, but also anonymity and shelter.

This conference aims to investigate the phenomenon of desertion from a comparative and global (labour) history perspective. In an earlier meeting, some first lines of the history of desertion in the Dutch empire have been explored, comparing cases from Europe, the Atlantic and Asian realms. This conference aims to broaden the perspective. Therefore, we invite (comparative) case-studies from different regions over the world in order test findings and to uncover new connections. We invite studies related to workers and communities from European and non-European histories. Examples of such cases could relate to:

- Desertion in the British, French, Spanish, Portuguese and other empires;
- Desertion in European, Asian or other armies;

- Desertion from labour contracts in Europe, Asia and the America's by contracted wage workers such as sailors, soldiers, maids, crafts men or others;
- Escape from coerced labour services, such servants (Europe), *herendiensten* (Java) or oeliam services (Ceylon, present-day Sri Lanka);
- Escape by convicts from work camps and prisons;
- Escape by slaves from slave ships, plantations, households in the Atlantic and Asian world;
- Escape by slaves, servants, sailors, and other workers in (West-)Africa;
- Histories of *maroon* communities;
- Individual desertions or mass desertions

The conference aims to bring together excellent and innovative scholars working on the history of labour and social history, but will also be open to economic and cultural historians who can provide interesting case studies and perspectives. Covering European, Atlantic and Asian environments, it encourages case studies that focus on one or multiple groups of workers engaged in the global economy. In doing so, this conference will trace and compare acts and patterns of desertion across empires, economic systems, regions and types of workers.

In order to study desertion comparatively way, we encourage participants to focus on the common research theme. The aim of the conference is to investigate the patterns of desertion and mobility as both economic and political responses to the processes at play in the early modern worlds of work and globalization. In order to engage with these patterns of desertion systematically, participants are invited to consider the impact of variables such as the labour relations involved; the definitions of 'desertion' for different types of work and workers by authorities, employers and workers; the quantitative evidence for the incidence of desertion (and where possible, to reconstruct 'desertion rates'); general patterns of work and mobility; mechanisms of control; the economic and political interests at stake for authorities, employers and workers.

Abstracts of maximum 500 words, indicating the proposed topic, sources and research methods, can be sent to desertion2015@gmail.com before 15 April 2015.

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