

The forced labour in the naval dockyard of ferrol during the 18th century

Alfredo Martín García*

ABSTRACT

The accession to the throne in the 18th century of the Bourbon dynasty, with their plans for reforming the country, led to an increase in the use of forced labour on the part of the State. The aim of this work is to analyse the impact of this policy on northeast Spain, focusing the analysis on the naval dockyard of Ferrol, one of the most important manufacturing and military centres in 18th century Spain.

Keywords: Delinquency, Forced labour, Spain, Galicia, 18th century.

RESUMEN

La ascension al trono a comienzos del siglo XVIII en España de la dinastía de los Borbones, con su política reformista trajo consigo el incremento del uso de la mano de obra forzada por parte del Estado. El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar el impacto de esta política en el noroeste español, focalizando el análisis en el arsenal de Ferrol, uno de los más importantes centros manufactureros y militares de la España de aquella centuria.

Palabras clave: Delincuencia, trabajos forzados, España, Galicia, siglo XVIII.

* University of Leon. aamang@unilea.es

1. THE NAVAL DOCKYARD OF FERROL IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY¹

The process of naval rebuilding that was undertaken by the Bourbon dynasty in eighteenth-century Spain had as one of its most striking outcomes the creation of a considerable network of dockyards, both in Spain itself and in the country's American colonies, these being indispensable for maintaining the growing naval forces (Solano, 1979, p. 13). One of the most important naval bases that sprang up at this time was in Ferrol (Merino Navarro, 1981). Thanks to its great advantages it became the primary construction site for the Spanish Royal Fleet. The creation of a dockyard or arsenal in Ferrol was tightly linked to the reign of Ferdinand VI and to his minister, the Marquess of Ensenada (Gómez Urdañez, 1996; Martín García, 2008). The King and minister had in mind an ambitious plan for naval re-armament in which this Galician port was intended to play a principal part. On 14 January 1750, after long and careful examination of all the options available, the Crown decided to site the new dockyard for the Royal Fleet in Ferrol (Vigo Trasancos, 1985, p. 50).

This meant that the second half of the eighteenth century saw a period of truly spectacular growth in the Galician town: between 1752 and 1797 its population grew twelve-fold. Ferrol had started that century as a place which was demographically stagnant, but by the end of it the town was an urban centre of some prominence within the Spanish context as a whole and the largest city in the Kingdom of Galicia in terms of number of inhabitants, according to the figures in the Census carried out by Floridablanca (1787) (Eiras Roel, 1988).

In the mid-eighteenth century, the building of a naval-industrial complex of the size of Ferrol implied the need for a considerable labour force that could not be met by the residents of the district alone. To make up this deficit, the administration resorted to two measures. The first was to offer particularly good payments to any subjects of the Crown who made up their minds to accept employment on the royal works; the second was the use of constraint to oblige certain individuals to work in this headquarters town of a naval command.

The men who were constrained by the authorities to come to Ferrol fell into two groups. The first were the so-called "honourable levies", involving obligatory transfer to Ferrol of a large number of workers, who were nonetheless given what the Crown deemed a fair rate of pay. The second were transportations of what could be termed those from marginalized sectors of society, brought to carry out the least appealing work on the installations. These latter included the prison population of Ferrol itself, together with the so-called "levies of rogues and vagabonds". The aim in this section is to investigate this type of transportation, which contributed greatly to the creation and consolidation of the dockyard facilities in Ferrol over the course of the eighteenth century.

¹ This piece of work forms part of a research project entitled "Marginación y asistencia social en el Noroeste de la Península Ibérica durante el Antiguo Régimen", subsidized by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (Ref. HAR 2010-17780).

2. LEVIES OF ROGUES AND VAGABONDS

The arrival of these socially marginalized individuals at the naval installations filled one of the most pressing needs in the demand for labour, finding somebody to do the toughest jobs, which it was difficult to get paid workers or even soldiers to do: comments have already been made on the problems that the Spanish Admiralty had with soldiers from regiments recruited among foreigners when these were ordered to work on chain pumps.

However, the Crown additionally saw in the works on naval dockyards a way of taking advantage of people who were seen as unproductive, as also an efficient way of imposing penalties for criminal activities. Although this section lumps together prison inmates and vagabonds, in fact the differences between the two are so obvious as to merit separate consideration.

2.1. VAGRANT SQUADS

The problem of vagabonds was in no way exclusive to the eighteenth century. Government worries about unemployed vagrants in practice began in the Middle Ages in Spain, even if they peaked in the laws passed in the centuries of the Modern Period (Pérez Estevez, 1976, pp. 166-169). What is certain is that the eighteenth century abounded in legal texts relating to vagrants and vagabonds, though they concentrated much more upon ways of getting economic benefits out of this mass of unproductive people than they did on any true preoccupation about their social re-insertion. While up until that century the usual fate of vagrants had been whipping, prison, forced labour for a particular person, or exile, the arrival of the Bourbons saw these punishments gradually disappear in favour of new approaches intended to provide more benefit for the State.

Thus, these outcasts from society began to be sentenced to joining the army or navy, or to employment on public works (Pike, R., 1983; Martínez Martínez, 2011). In respect of vagabonds assigned to the Fleet, a three-fold distinction should be made. First, there were those sent to work in dockyards, next those sent to “naval battalions” (Marines) and finally, youngsters assigned either to ship-building or to the King’s ships. Without a shadow of a doubt, assignment to a naval dockyard was the worst possible fate, as in practice vagrants sent there suffered conditions as hard as those of any common criminal sentenced to work in those establishments. Indeed, very often no distinction was made between them and the convict population, as both did the same work, and they could even be sent to work on the pumps used to empty docks, so that when looked at in detail the dividing line between these two groups is somewhat blurred. Their stay working in naval dockyards was usually around four years, unless they had been set a specific term of service: This was decreed by the Crown on 2 February 1756 (Archivo General de Marina, Viso del Marqués: A.G.S., *Arsenales*, Bundle 3.705).

Special mention should perhaps be made of the youngsters sent to serve in the Fleet, not so much because of their numbers, more because their case is interesting. The causes

bringing them there were varied. The commonest situation was for these to be young offenders caught by the legal authorities where they originated and sent to the naval bases to be trained in a trade, whether this was as a sailor, a worker in the shipyards, or sometimes, when the need was great, simply to be used as cheap labour on very rough tasks. Alongside this group, the largest in the category, there were also some lads who were sent off to serve in the city by their own parents as a way of curbing their bad behaviour and channelling them into a more honest lifestyle. This situation was much less common, but is known about because of the requests filed in the General Archives in Simancas from parents petitioning the naval authorities to return their sons home from the naval bases, once they thought that their punishment had been sufficient (Santalla López, 1996).

In any case, most of these lads, like other vagabonds, reached Ferrol as part of the chain-gangs or squads that were formed by the Crown authorities at fairly regular intervals so as to clear such individuals out of the country, especially when they were so numerous as to lead to worries (in times of economic crisis), or when men were needed for the army or navy because of a state of war. The excessive severity with which the Spanish War Office, which was the body responsible for these arrangements for most of the eighteenth century, organized such transportations led to a host of protests, both from the parents of youngsters swept up in them and from family members of adults who were also included in them (Archivo General de Simancas: A.G.S., *Secretaría de Marina*, Bundle 694).

As indicated previously, the lads sent to naval bases were given one of two fixed assignments: either they became apprentice seamen or they learned a trade from the shipyard workers. With regard to the first of these, there were considerable expectations in the possibilities of the scheme, as the Spanish Fleet had urgent need of trained sailors to make up for the grave deficiencies of men on the rolls. Perhaps for this reason, perhaps also because of the youth of the lads involved, who were supposed to be taken early enough to mould them to the Fleet's intentions, the orders from Madrid were similar to those regarding the "honourable levies", indicating that they should be given kindly treatment that would avoid them being put off by life at sea, but rather encourage them to be attracted to it (A.G.S., *Secretaría de Marina*, Bundle 693).

Although this practice did occur earlier in the Galician base, it was above all in the second half of the eighteenth century that the number of youngsters recruited grew significantly. Thus, in 1781 the Dockyard Governor Antonio Mejía wrote to the Minister of the Marine that the corvette "Cazadora" had been readied in the naval dockyard at Ferrol for training lads. In respect of the outcome of this experiment, the Governor was optimistic, stressing what he considered major progress from people who in most cases were on board a ship for the first time in their lives. He wrote that he made bold to say that this extremely useful arrangement would ensure that they were perfectly instructed in everything that a good sailor should know, so that these youngsters would be as capable on their very first day in a warship as men who had learnt their trade over the course of repeated campaigns (A.G.S., *Secretaría de Marina*, Bundle 700).

Despite these enthusiastic statements, the Governor himself recognized the limited gifts of the youngsters sent to Ferrol as opposed to those from Cadiz and Carthagenas who he felt were sharper-witted, more agile and more willing than those sent to Ferrol from Salamanca and Valladolid, who were punier and frailer.

Another of the assignments given to young vagrants was work in the shipyards. The purpose was similar to what was sought in the case of those sent to warships: to ensure that they were channelled into productive activities. It appears that it was in the 1750s, a period frequently pointed out as one of extreme demand for an additional workforce for Ferrol, when this sort of action began to become noteworthy campaigns (A.G.S., *Secretaría de Marina*, Bundle 699).

On 21 December 1751, Governor Perea informed Minister Ensenada of the arrival of 182 youngsters of a range of ages, taken in the levy of vagrants, who had quickly adapted to work in the yards alongside carpenters, caulkers and other workers in the Royal Shipyard of Esteiro, who were teaching them their various trades. The Naval Paymasters gave each of them two-fifths of a silver *real*, an amount roughly equivalent to two English pence of the period, per day, together with a ration of ammunition bread, also providing them with clothing and work tools. For their part, each of the tradesmen from the shipyard who took charge of a lad would receive a bonus. The documents record that the lads had been clothed and provided with a stock of axes and adzes so that those set to dockside wood-working could begin to learn skills (A.G.S., *Secretaría de Marina*, Bundle 694).

It is this specific gang of vagabonds, reaching Ferrol at the end of 1751, that has the largest amount of documentation about it deposited in the General Archive in Simancas, including a detailed register of the 182 lads, with their ages, family data and places of origin. This is the only statistical information about such a group surviving from the whole of the eighteenth century, so that the figures must be treated with some caution, with the hope that at some later date further registers will be found and improve what may be a skewed view of the facts. As for origins, when categorized by modern-day provincial and regional divisions, La Rioja and Salamanca Provinces would stand out as the most prominent sources, with 14% and 11.5% respectively. After these came the Provinces of Leon, Palencia, Burgos and Valladolid, together with the current Province of Corunna. Much smaller numbers were contributed by the eastern Provinces in Galicia, by Asturias, Navarre, the South of Castile-Leon and parts of Extremadura and Castile-La Mancha regions, along with Barcelona.

These data show one unsurprising fact, which is that lads from the northern half of Spain predominated, this being easily explicable, because it was precisely that zone on which the naval dockyard drew when gathering up vagrants. Similarly, the appearance of small numbers from localities in the southern part of the central plains and along the Mediterranean coast is easily explained if it is kept in mind that this list of vagabonds gives their places of birth, not the location from which they were taken for the levy. It must be assumed that these individuals from the southern half of Spain had moved to the North,

where they were detained by the authorities. It should also not be forgotten that it was common practice to transfer squads of vagabonds from one naval arsenal to another when there was a necessity for a bigger labour force or when there was a worry about their large numbers in one place.

Moreover, the great majority of these vagrants came from rural areas, specifically 68.2% of them, with only 31.8% from an urban background. On this point, some exception must be made for a couple of cities in Castile, such as Valladolid and Burgos, which provided the bulk of the individuals from within their respective provinces. Despite this, in the remaining provinces the role of the countryside is evident, and even in Salamanca and Logroño Provinces, the numbers from the respective provincial capitals and other large urban areas came to less than half. In the case of the Province of Salamanca, out of 19 lads whose place of origin is given there were eight who came from the provincial capital or from the city of Ciudad Rodrigo. With regard to La Rioja, of the 23 lads recorded there were ten from the provincial capital Logroño or from the town of Haro.

In respect of the ages of these lads, it can be stated that the average age of the group was 14.9 years, while the mode age, that is, the most frequently occurring age in the list, was 14 years. Thus, this was a group still at a young age, which explains the great hopes that the naval authorities entertained in re-educating them.

In any case, this process was no bed of roses, an outcome of often strong resistance on the part of the vagrants to changing their ways, this attitude encouraged by living conditions that were not exactly luxurious. So, at the end of 1752, the lads protested openly to the authorities in Madrid about their situation, since they had no beds in the buildings where they were housed, nor clothing sufficient to protect them from the rigours of the Galician winter. Faced with these accusations, the Dockyard Governor himself had to admit to the Marquess of Ensenada that the housing conditions faced by the young vagabonds were not good, because there were many of them and the naval headquarters' funds were sparse (A.G.S., *Secretaría de Marina*, Bundle 694). Even so, it seems that other reasons linked to security and the discipline of the contingent of vagrants had led to the situation in Ferrol. For example, in this same letter to Ensenada, Perea stated that he was reluctant to provide straw mattresses to these individuals, for fear that there might be a fire. It should not be forgotten that arson was one of the most striking means of protest, whether of vagrants or of prisoners working in naval dockyards, and was a particularly serious risk in facilities where wood and gunpowder were present in abundance.

This state of physical discomfort was matched by psychological unease, as they were constantly under surveillance by their warders. In any case, this was perfectly understandable if the large number of escapes from these establishments is taken into account, together with the far from disciplined attitude of the youngsters during their work. One clear sign of this was the thefts from their masters that the shipyard apprentices committed in the base, which led building and carpentering foremen to become much less

keen to take them on and teach them their trades. A further example of such indiscipline would be the continuance of habits from the past, like their behaviour towards the clothing provided by the Naval Paymasters, which they sold, used as stakes in betting, or simply treated in a totally careless way (A.G.S., *Secretaría de Marina*, Bundle 694).

The numbers of vagrants sent to “naval battalions” constituted the smallest of the three groups described. It can be stated that until the Law passed on 22 March 1779 the totals sent to these units were tiny, and while thereafter they grew, they never reached any considerable level. Vagabonds concentrated at recruiting stations in the north of Spain were sent to Ferrol (A.G.S., *Secretaría de Marina*, Bundle 699). In the light of the characteristics of marine detachments, it may be said that a vagrant sent to serve as a marine in the Fleet, just like those sent to army regiments, did not lead a life very different from other fighting men. Indeed, the only distinction was the method of recruitment and the duration of service.

2.2. PRISONERS

At least in theory, throughout the eighteenth century the Crown attempted to remedy the evils of vagrancy with measures stimulating the social rehabilitation of vagabonds, but no such policy was adopted in the case of those sentenced for other types of offence. It is true that the great Spanish Enlightenment thinkers who took an interest in such matters, for instance Lardizábal or Jovellanos, saw penalties as a way of regenerating individuals before restoring them to society. Nevertheless, it is equally the case that legislation at no time seriously proposed moral correction or civic education of those sentenced as an aim of policies on penitentiaries (Tomás y Valiente, 1969, p. 355). While this occurred in general with all the punishments imposed by law under the Old Order (Spain’s equivalent of France’s Ancien Régime), in the case of those sent to dockyards, the law left no room for doubt as to the impossibility of rehabilitation. A clear indicator of this would be the Pragmatic Sanction of 12 March 1771 (A.G.S., *Secretaría de Marina*, Bundle 700).

In brief, those sentenced to the dockyards were seen by the law as individuals whose crimes were so serious that there was no hope of a change in their antisocial behaviour. Hence, at least in theory, these were guilty of killings, deserting from the army, smuggling, counterfeiting coins or stamped paper, and certain thefts aggravated by wounding victims or breaking into private houses, a single exemption from such dockyard service being made in the case of arsonists, for obvious reasons (Pérez Estevez, 1979, p. 262). Despite this clear specification, in fact a large number of people sentenced for other offences of less seriousness were sent to work in the dockyards, including vagrants. This is explained both by the need for a workforce for the most arduous tasks in these establishments and by the well-known lack of proportionality of punishments in the legislation of the Old Order (Tomás y Valiente, 1969, p. 359). The differences between those sentenced for major

crimes and those who had been involved in more minor offences were manifested in two ways, at least in theory: the length of sentence and the nature of the work to be done. As for the first of these, as was to be expected, prisoners who had committed serious crimes were given the harshest penalties, which might even involve work in the dockyard for life, whilst the remaining offenders would in no case face a sentence of more than ten years.

The risk implied by individuals sentenced for life was evident. As the Commandant-General at Ferrol noted in 1775, there was nothing that they might not do, since they held their lost liberty, which they were bound at all times to wish to regain, more dear than their own safety, so there was no trick, effort or risk that they would not try, blinded by the strength of their feelings. Despite these fears on the part of the naval authorities, in reality the number of individuals sentenced for serious crimes was tiny in that period. Indeed, in that year there was just one prisoner who matched these characteristics: Joaquín Álvarez, who had been a soldier in the Asturias regiment, sentenced for stealing a blanket and deserting.

With regard to the work assigned, serious criminals were given the hardest tasks, such as rowing in galleys, or pumping water out of docks. At Ferrol, there was never any squadron of galleys, these being confined to the Mediterranean, so the hard labour of operating chain pumps was the most demanding undertaken by prisoners. In any case, prisoners convicted of serious offences were increasingly rare in the dockyards, as they were feared by the naval authorities as possible leaders of mutinies, arsonists or causers of other sorts of disturbance. This led minor offenders also to have to take part in such back-breaking work. To sum up, the naval administration did not make any distinctions on the basis of the seriousness of the crime committed when counting these people. In the end, they were all prisoners, and with the exception of the duration of the penalty, the treatment given them was practically identical, in other words, awful. In the Ferrol base, consideration of the changes in the prisoner population between its beginnings in the small naval station in the village of La Graña on the edge of the town until the early nineteenth century shows that it was very changeable, an outcome of labour requirements of the Navy from time to time.

It is nonetheless somewhat surprising how few prisoners were recorded in the 1750s, the period when the main dockyard was constructed and precisely when they were most needed. The explanation might lie in the lack of facilities suited to housing any large number of prisoners, which would suggest to the base authorities that only a “reasonable” contingent should be held, so they could be controlled if they attempted to escape or mutiny. It was not until 1765 that plans were made to construct a building in Ferrol for lodging prisoners that would provide sufficient security to allow a larger number to be brought to work in the dockyard (Vigo Trasancos, 1985, p. 100). These plans were not put into effect until the beginning of the next decade. Oddly, it was between the late 1760s and the early 1790s that there was a major growth in the number of convicts, rising from 246 in 1768 (LIBRARY OF THE ACADEMY OF HISTORY, Censo de Aranda, obispado de Mondoñedo) to 1,082 in 1790 (MUSEO NAVAL DE MADRID, *Estado general*

de la Armada, Madrid 1791), the peak figure for prisoners working in the Ferrol dockyard. Their numbers dropped appreciably from the next year onward and throughout the 1790s, then rose to some extent at the start of the nineteenth century, a period when there was great activity at the naval base because of the war with Great Britain. They fell abruptly when the Royal Fleet was broken up as a consequence of its defeat at Trafalgar and of the Peninsular War.

To determine the origins of this large group, it is possible to use the death registers from the parish church of the Ferrol base (PAROCHIAL ARCHIVE MILITARY, Ferrol, *Libro 1º de difuntos del arsenal de Ferrol*, nº 40). These documents start in mid 1798 and end in 1803. They thus cover only a short period, but careful consideration of them does give a very interesting overview of the main places from which the convict population in Ferrol had come, as prisoners' places of birth are systematically indicated. Out of 341 valid entries (there are twelve for which this detail is missing) it can be seen that the greater part of the prisoners were not from Galicia, as 87.4% of the total, the great majority, were from other parts of Spain. In this predominant group not from Galicia there are ten entries for foreign prisoners, amounting to 2.9% of the total: five were from Spain's American colonies, two Portuguese, one French, one Maltese, and one from the city of Melilla in North Africa.

Within this majority group, there was an absolute predominance of the Provinces in the northern half of Spain. This is understandable if it is kept in mind that the Ferrol dockyard, according to the edict of 1771, received prisoners sentenced by the Chancellery of Valladolid, the Royal Council of Navarre, and the circuit courts of Galicia and Asturias (A.G.S., *Secretaría de Marina*, Bundle 697). The most striking contribution was from Asturias, from where 15% of the total convict population came, followed by smaller percentages from the Provinces of Corunna, Leon, Burgos and Salamanca. It thus appears that Asturias, Castile-Leon and to a lesser degree Galicia were the areas providing the bulk of the convicts, amounting to 66.3% of the total entries.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Eiras Roel, A (1988). Una aproximación a la estructura demográfica urbana de Galicia en el censo de 1787. *Semata*, nº 1, 155-177.
- Geremek, B. (1989). *La piedad y la horca. Historia de la miseria y la caridad en Europa*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.
- Gómez Urdañez, J.L. (1996). *El proyecto reformista de Ensenada*. Lleida: Universidad de Lleida.
- Martín García, A. (2008). *Auge y decadencia. Desarrollo económico, cultura y educación en Ferrolterra durante el Antiguo Régimen*. A Coruña: Fundación Barrie de la Maza.
- Martínez Martínez, M. (2011). *Los forzados de Marina en la España del siglo XVIII (1700-1775)*.

Almería: Universidad de Almería.

Merino Navarro, J.P. (1981). *La Armada española en el siglo XVIII*, Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española.

Pérez Estévez, R.M. (1976). *El problema de los vagos en la España del siglo XVIII*, Madrid: Confederación Española de Cajas de Ahorro.

Pérez Estévez, R.M. (1979). Delincuencia en la España del siglo XVIII: los presidiarios de Marina. *Cuadernos de investigación histórica*, nº 3, 259-273.

Pike, R. (1983). *Penal servitude in Early Modern Spain*. Madison: University of Wisconsin.

Santalla López, M. (1996). *A mestranza do real arsenal de Ferrol no século XVIII*. Ferrol: Concello de Ferrol.

Solano, F. (1979). *Antonio de Ulloa y la Nueva España*, México: UNAM.

Tomás y Valiente, F. (1969). *El derecho penal de la monarquía absoluta*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.

Vigo Trasancos, A. (1985). *Arquitectura y urbanismo en el Ferrol del siglo XVIII*. Vigo: COAG.