Escape and Reform in the Early Modern Danish Prison System

Heinsen, Johan

Published in:
Moving Workers

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
10.1515/9783111137155-003

Publication date:
2023

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Johan Heinsen

Chapter 2
Escape and Reform in the Early-Modern Danish Prison System

A key aspect of Denmark's early modern penal system was the continuous use of extramural convict labour in the service of the military state.[1] For more than two centuries, the punishment of hard labour in chains existed alongside the more well-known institution of the prison workhouse, forming a bifurcated prison system. Whereas both genders could be employed in prison workhouses to produce textiles, only men were sent to labour at naval and army facilities.[2] The latter punishment was known to contemporaries as "slavery", and the prisons housing the respective convicts at night as "slaveries".[3] Inmates worked on fortifications, shipyards, and docks, contributing to the construction and maintenance of the state's military infrastructure. They often laboured side by side with navy sailors and mercenary soldiers, though they were always recognisable as a distinct part of the workforce, identified by their chains and – in later periods – their prison uniforms. The system was linked to the larger Northern European military labour market and its state-driven trajectories of labour mobility and coercion.[4] Former soldiers from Denmark's mercenary army were disproportionately overrepresented among the inmates, with a large share of them being migrants from all over the Northern European market for military labour. This special form of punishment thus served the demands of the military state in multiple overlapping

1 This chapter builds on my monograph *Det Første Fængsel* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2018). I would like to thank Emilie Luther Valentin for providing feedback on the text.

2 On prison workhouses in Denmark, see Emilie Luther Valentin, *Feelings of Imprisonment* (PhD thesis, Aalborg University, 2022); Nina Koefoed, "I Trust You with My Child: Parental Attitudes to Local Authorities in Cases of Disobedient Children in 18th Century Denmark," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 33 (4) (2020): 489–504; Anette Larner, *The Good Household Gone Bad* (PhD thesis, Aarhus University, 2018).

3 An in-depth discussion of the use of this term by contemporaries can be found in Johan Heinsen, "Penal Slavery in Early Modern Scandinavia," *Journal of Global Slavery* 6 (3) (2021): 343–368.

4 The logics driving the institution's creation are discussed within the context of similar European penal labour schemes in Johan Heinsen, "Historicizing Extramural Convict Labour: Trajectories and Transitions in Early Modern Europe," *International Review of Social History* 66 (1) (2021): 111–133. A broader discussion of the uses of convict labour in global history is found in the introduction to Christian G. De Vito and Alex Lichtenstein, eds., *Global Convict Labour* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111137155-003

ways – by creating a disposable workforce as well as by providing a punitive measure enabling state workers to be disciplined without losing control of their labour.[5] It represented a mobilisation scheme that placed workers in certain locations or circulated them between them, often as the result of a need for additional labour. At the same time, the punishment was meant to be "exemplary" and to widely communicate the consequences of transgressions. As a punishment designed to deter, extramural labour therefore served the purpose of keeping working populations in place both literally and figuratively.

From its emergence in the sixteenth century, this prison institution was designed around the extraction of labour. Labour remains a central aspect even in the modern Danish prison system, but the meaning of penal labour has slowly shifted over the five centuries since its introduction. Today, labour is principally understood in its relation to the rehabilitative scope of prisons. Simultaneously, the idea of making inmates defined as the worst transgressors work outside of the walls, where opportunities for escape are ample, has come to be contradictory to the notion that prison also produces security. This shift was cemented with the opening of penitentiaries in the 1850s based on international models emerging in the early nineteenth century.[6] These penitentiaries made isolation from society and other inmates their central penal technique. The significance of this shift is well-known in scholarship: Historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth century pitched the penitentiary as a triumph of modernism and reason.[7] In the 1970s, revisionists began reinterpreting the penitentiary as a reflection of a more general reconfiguration of power relations writ large.[8] Both perspectives, however, have located the impetus for change in the realms of ideas and discourses – and perhaps most importantly, in the work of Enlighten-

5 Johan Heinsen, "Mercenary Punishments," *International Review of Social History* (forthcoming).

6 On the emergence of penitentiaries in Denmark, see Peter Scharff Smith, *Moralske Hospitaler: Det modern fængselsvæsens gennembrud 1770–1870* (Copenhagen: Forum, 2003). The prevalence of the revisionist perspective in Scandinavian historiography has led to a tendency to not consider the early modern institutions as part of the history of prisons in their own right. See e.g. Peter Scharff Smith and Thomas Ugelvik, eds., *Scandinavian Penal History, Culture and Prison Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

7 In a Danish context, the most notable example is Fr. Stuckenberg, *Fængselsvæsenet i Danmark*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gad, 1893–96).

8 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1977); Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

ment thinkers and reformers: Fundamentally, the nature of prison changed as a result of things happening outside its walls.[9]

This chapter presents a reading that posits a longer trajectory of change. It argues that the shift away from a focus on productivity and towards the prioritisation of security and isolation can be traced in response to the myriad actions of convicts themselves.[10] It thus sees the driver of institutional change not in the determined brains of officials but instead in their sweaty palms as they faced an inmate population endeavouring to escape its confinement. At its core, the prison emerged as a means of keeping the punished in place. As argued recently by sociologists Thomas Max Martin and Gilles Chantraine, "preventing escape is an essential part of the *raison d'être* of prisons, which is academically neglected."[11] This contribution concentrates precisely on this struggle, examining its dynamics from the early seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century.

The analysis focuses on large-scale collective action and mass escape in particular, primarily because these events appear to have triggered some of the most noticeable changes. However, it also relates such extraordinary events to the everyday struggles and attempts to flee of individuals and smaller groups. Common practices of autonomy thus form the backdrop for the more dramatic events taking centre stage on the following pages, effectively blurring the line between individual and collective action. I argue that convicts' attempts to practise autonomy – most notably through escape – were an important driver of institutional change alongside the more well-established explanatory factors extrinsic to prisons themselves and described in the literature outlined above. Arguably, the changes occurring in direct response to escapes ultimately made prisons look more like the penitentiaries we know: Institutions that often involve work programmes as part of their rehabilitative

9 The most dominant historical critiques of this framework have similarly interpreted prisons as the result of extrinsic factors. Most relevant in this context is perhaps Pieter Spierenburg, *The Prison Experience* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1991).

10 For a discussion of "agency" as a driver of institutional change, see Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, *London Lives: Poverty, Crime and the Making of a Modern City, 1690–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). In recent years, the theme of escape as an expression of agency has gained considerably in the study of penal transportation. A work incorporating many of these insights and viewing escape practices as a contributor to penal innovation is Clare Andersen, *Convicts: A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 360–389. While this chapter does not employ the term (primarily due to its vagueness as a result of academic overuse), it is indebted to this turn.

11 Gilles Chaintraine and Thomas Max Martin, "Introduction: Toward a Sociology of Prison Escape," in: Thomas Max Martin and Gilles Chantraine, eds., *Prison Breaks: Toward a Sociology of Escape* (London: Palgrave, 2018), 1–30.

aspirations, but that are principally focused on producing security rather than on labour extraction.

The chapter will focus on three moments in which hard labour as punishment was transformed in response to mass prison breaks: The first part culminates in 1640, when the first Danish prison was rebuilt in response to escapes. The second section investigates the dynamics leading to the permanent closure of the same prison in 1741 due to fear of mutinies and collective flight. Finally, the last part looks at the evolving system of displacement that can be viewed as the backdrop for a large-scale insurrection at the prison workhouse in Christianshavn in 1817. The narrative takes us from the emergence of the institution of prison in Denmark in the late 1500s to the beginning of a new carceral regime in the early nineteenth century – with the latter crucially no longer focused on labour extraction but on incarceration as a technology of docility and security.

Endemic escapes

On 29 March 1640, the Danish king Christian IV (1568–1648) wrote an order to his son-in-law, statesman Corfitz Ulfeldt, tasking him with the construction of a new prison – a *trunke* – to replace the existing one by the Copenhagen docks (*Bremerholmen*). Ulfeldt was in command of Copenhagen Castle along with the adjacent naval facilities that included the shipyard of the Danish navy. Christian IV is most famous for the resounding defeats he suffered in his quest to wrest control over the Baltic from Sweden and position himself as a European heavyweight. Corfitz Ulfeldt is best known for the treason he would commit a decade later, when he joined the Swedish archenemy following the emergence of suspicions that he had plotted to coup Christian IV's heir. The letter in question places the two men at the centre of the earliest known example of a form of low-scale prison reform encountered throughout the history of prisons in Denmark. It reads:

> Since the prisoners still escape Trunken daily, it is best that another *trunke* be built for them in a place where better watch can be kept. It shall be built from rocks, since timber will not last and will cost more than rocks, in particular if good, firm timber is used. The foundation of said *trunke* is to be made without boulders, in the style that all foundations are made in Glückstadt. Thought shall be given to how those who are inside can dispose of their shit. If it [the prison] could be built near the beach, they might carry it [the shit] out

> themselves at night, by which manner the loads could be many and small, so that the prison warden does not have to let more out at once than he can handle at a time.[12]

It was a change prompted by the inadequacy of the existing prison with regard to retaining its inmates. The building that was eventually erected is among the earliest known purpose-built criminal prisons in Europe, predating the Amsterdam prison identified by Pieter Spierenburg as the world's first such institution by 14 years.[13]

The earliest known use of coerced workers at the site is documented for 1566, when a naval defeat prompted a high demand for labour at the docks. Authorities on Zealand, the island on which Copenhagen is located, were ordered to send "idle, able-bodied hands" to the Copenhagen docks.[14] We know of similar calls to round up unemployed men and put them to work in military infrastructure beginning in 1558. They can be linked to the anti-vagrancy policies that were being instituted to allow authorities on all levels of society to force repeat idlers into "thraldom and labour", as one legal text phrased it.[15] Private employers do not appear to have made use of this opportunity, but the state itself did. Over the following decades, men were apprehended and sent to Copenhagen and the fortresses along the Swedish border where the state was focusing its efforts. What initially looked like a conscription scheme appears to have gradually turned into a penal measure in its own right: At some point before 1600, thieves who had been sentenced to hanging were pardoned in order to be used in the same fashion. From an order issued in 1601, we know that during the institution's early years, such men would eventually hang when they were no longer considered sufficiently productive.[16] Convicts appear to have been housed in barracks and in the dungeon of Copenhagen Castle until the first iteration of Trunken – as the prison itself came to be known – was built around 1620.

From its very beginning, the punishment saw regular escapes. Perhaps the earliest trace of this is a note from 1576 which clearly states that special precautions were needed. In it, the king mandated state authorities throughout Denmark to apprehend "loose people [who] roam [and] who serve no one and have no permission to travel", with strong men among these itinerants to be "put in irons"

---

12 C. F. Bricka and J. A. Fridericia, eds., *Kong Christian den Fjerdes Egenhændige Breve: 1636–1640* (Copenhagen: Rudolph Klein, 1882), 319–320.

13 Spierenburg, *Prison Experience,* 143.

14 L. Laursen, ed., *Kancelliets Brevbøger: 1566–1570* (Copenhagen, C. A. Reitzel, 1896), #90.

15 Tyge Krogh, *Staten og de Besiddelsesløse på Landet* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1987), 54.

16 Rigsarkivet, Lensregnskaber 1559–1662, København A., Regnskaber 1599–1602. I would like to thank Tyge Krogh for this reference.

and sent to Copenhagen.[17] This is the earliest mention of the chains that would become the trademark of the slaveries. All convicts performing extramural labour eventually had to wear chains, which were generally light enough to not impede the labour extraction – their main purpose was to make inmates who ran away easily identifiable. Chains were not enough, however: In 1599, we find the earliest mention of guards in a note to a state official in Blekinge who was admonished that such coerced workers were to be kept under observation so that they "do not run away".[18] But convicts were able to escape nevertheless: A note from May 1607 refers to a group of vagrants who had gotten away – the first explicit mention of a collective escape.[19] The earliest known prison break from Trunken itself occurred on 11 January 1621, with a note explaining that a number of convicts had escaped during the Christmas celebrations and should now be searched for around Zealand.[20] A similar note from later in the same year refers to lists of escaped convicts that were to be circulated among authorities. The lists themselves are not preserved, but the note explicitly states that the way to identify these escapees was by their lack of identity papers, and that special watch should thus be kept at ferry berths.[21] The following year, the king's frustrations expressed themselves in an order to penalise runners by applying their original punishment, which in many cases apparently meant hanging.[22] The first named escapee can be found in a list of convicts from 1622/23: Gulbrand Sivertsen, who disappeared on 26 July 1622. He had been convicted of burglaries in Akershus county in Norway and sent to Copenhagen to labour.[23]

The earliest escape for which we know the particulars of *how* it occurred is described in the memoirs of Icelandic naval artillerist Jon Olafsson and must have taken place in the 1620s, though Olafsson does not date the event. The text's details are difficult to verify, but Olafsson knew Trunken well since he had experienced a stint as a chained convict labourer himself. In his recollections, he tells the story of a man named Peter, a former student from the town of Korsør on Zealand, with whom he had shared a room in Copenhagen at one point. Peter was about to be married before being sentenced to 18 years for having cut his father-in-law with a penknife. He eventually escaped the prison with seven other

17 L. Laursen, ed., *Kancelliets Brevbøger: 1576–1579* (Copenhagen, C. A. Reitzel, 1900), #78.
18 L. Laursen, ed., *Kancelliets Brevbøger: 1603–1608* (Copenhagen, C. A. Reitzel, 1915), #390.
19 Ibid., #583.
20 L. Laursen, ed., *Kancelliets Brevbøger: 1621–1623* (Copenhagen, C. A. Reitzel, 1922), #8.
21 Ibid., #194.
22 Ibid., #454.
23 C. F. Bricka and J. A. Fridericia, eds., *Kong Christian den Fjerdes Egenhændige Breve: 1589–1625* (Copenhagen: Rudolph Klein, 1887–1889): 249–263.

convicts by way of sliding backwards through the latrine and from there into the sea, where they swam to a nearby sand dune. There they disposed of their irons. One man was caught and hanged, but the others were able to escape to Sweden, and Peter eventually became an educator for the children of a lord. He later returned to Denmark to claim an inheritance held by his erstwhile prospective father-in-law and victim, who refused to believe that Peter had left the prison legitimately and was only willing to pay him if he could prove he was a free man. This infuriated Peter, who was ultimately apprehended by the town's authorities, taken to Copenhagen, and executed.[24]

Throughout their existence, endemic escapes defined the slaveries. The nature of the work, which was typically performed outside, meant that total surveillance was impossible, so escapes tended to happen at worksites. Having shed their fetters, convicts would attempt to return to their former identities or create new ones. In the agricultural economy of early modern Denmark, a sustainable existence outside of the labour market was impossible, as the period saw a criminalisation of begging and itinerancy. Eventually, a runner would therefore have to find a new master. In the second half of the seventeenth and throughout the eighteenth century, many tried their luck with mercenary army regiments that were always eager to accept new recruits. This practice was most sustainable when convicts managed to cross the border into Sweden, whose regiments offered similar opportunities with less risk of recognition.[25]

A process of escalation

In a way, the prison built by Ulfeldt in 1640 was a success. It was renovated in 1706 and stood until 1741, when it was closed and the building became a naval storehouse. It mostly fulfilled its purpose of retaining inmates for over 100 years. At times, its occupants formed a labour reserve to be employed elsewhere besides at the docks – such as in the 1670s and 1680s, when prisoners were transported from Trunken to the Danish Caribbean colony being established on St. Thomas, or in the early 1710s, when Copenhagen was ravished by the plague and they

24 Jon Olafsson, *Jon Olafssons Oplevelser som Bøsseskytte under Christian IV*, trans. S. Bløndal (Copenhagen: Julius Clausen, 1905), 33–34.

25 Johan Heinsen, "Runaway Heuristics: A Micro-Spatial Study of Immobilizing Chains c. 1790," *Annals of the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi* 56 (1) (2022): 37–60.

worked as grave diggers.[26] Throughout this period, the convict population grew slowly but steadily, and the Copenhagen institutions eventually became unable to hold all the individuals sentenced to convict labour. The 1740s were an especially busy time that resulted in the construction of prison workhouses in three Danish provinces as well as in Norway, which was part of the Danish king's composite state at the time. A number of fortresses also came to hold chained male convicts in a manner similar to Trunken, though this expansion appears more gradual. It was precisely during this period of prison building and expansion that Trunken was closed down in May 1741. The reasoning for this decision is not entirely clear, but Copenhagen's city architect Laurids de Thurah provided a likely explanation in an account from 1748. Describing the naval dockyard, he recounted that it had been

> A terror to many ears, at least to miscreants, who for their misdeeds had not quite deserved death, or perhaps they had deserved it, but had been pardoned, who were sentenced and put to labour in irons on Bremerholm, either for life or shorter after the severity of their misdeeds. But since one has perceived this kind of people, and not unjustly, to be too dangerous to host in this place which is of utmost importance to the King and the country, since it was reasoned that he who has committed one villainous deed in this world might easily decide to commit more, if the opportunity is given to them, and that such mischievous people might decide, when they get their chance, to set some warehouse on fire, of which many exist at the docks of easily combustible materials, not so much to take revenge or to do damage in itself, but to try, in the midst of the fire and the confusion it would cause, to free themselves of their slavery.[27]

This perceived danger appears closely linked to the fact that Trunken was located at the heart of the dockyard. Hauling lumber and other combustible materials for shipbuilding activities was a recurring task performed by convicts, so the threat of arson was not an unreasonable perception. As the city's official architect, de Thurah surely had better sources than those available to us today, and his own brother was a high-ranking naval officer at the time. Yet these dangers related to incarcerating and exploiting convicts at a strategically important site were not new. What had changed?

Preceding the closure was a prolonged process that seems to have begun in 1732, when the decision was made to erect a new prison in northern Copenhagen. The building took longer to finish than expected, largely because the initial plan of creating a rasphouse – a type of prison institution revolving around intramural

26 Johan Heinsen, *Mutiny in the Danish Atlantic World: Convicts, Sailors and a Dissonant Empire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

27 Laurids de Thurah, *Hafnia Hodierna* (Copenhagen, 1748), 207–208.

labour and pioneered by the Dutch – was set in motion but eventually abandoned.[28] Instead, the prison that became known as Stokhusslaveriet was a direct continuation of the practice of extramural convict labour known from the naval dockyard. However, it was administered by the army rather than the navy, and its inmates were no longer used regularly at the shipyard.

On 13 May 1741, 93 men were marched from Bremerholmen across the city to the new facility, which had taken nine years to complete. If we wish to investigate the validity of de Thurah's explanation, we therefore need to look at the period before 1732. Sifting through the archives of the various naval courts that handled transgressions of convicts at the docks, we find ample information to substantiate the architect's interpretation: The 1720s and early 1730s saw a wave of collective escapes that can be linked to a large influx of former soldiers. In 1709, Denmark had engaged in a war with Sweden that ended in 1720. The fighters of the mercenary army – many of whom had been recruited abroad so as not to put pressure on the agricultural labour market in Denmark – soon bolstered the ranks of the convicts. They ran the prison, disciplined snitches, operated a black market, orchestrated thefts, and attempted daring mass escapes. Because a complete inmate register is preserved in which all prisoners and their backgrounds are listed and entries, exits, and potential escapes are recorded, we can trace the contours of the groups that were influential at Trunken from 1722 to 1732.

One of the first indications of the dynamics that came to define the institution during this period comes from 1722, when convict and ex-soldier Abraham Bølge was revealed by a fellow inmate to have forged passports for several prisoners. Passports were required for escapees to board ferries and cross maritime borders.[29] Bølge was subsequently punished by having his thumb cut off to prevent him from writing. The man who had revealed him was ostracised by his fellow convicts and beaten up by a gang of former soldiers with enough influence in the prison that no one challenged them.[30] Several such episodes of collective action are known from the early 1720s, and they increased in frequency and severity by the middle of the decade. The convicts also grew more daring in other regards, for example by challenging the rations: Some of the men who had been involved in the earlier activities surrounding Bølge's forgeries, including former sailor Anders Christensen Ged, were among those lodging complaints about the prison cook in 1726. They claimed that the porridge was "thin" and that they were being

28 F. Stuckenberg, *Fængselsvæsenet i Danmark 1550–1741* (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gad, 1893).

29 *Forordning om Passer og Skudsmaal*, published 19 February 1701. Reprinted in Jacob Henric Schou, *Chronologisk Register over de Kongelige Forordninger og Aabne Breve, 1699–1730* (Copenhagen: Niels Christensen, 1795).

30 The story of this event is told in detail in Heinsen, "Penal Slavery."

served only bones instead of meat.[31] When they were served fish, they got nothing but "the head and the tail".[32]

There may well have been some substance to their grievances. The same year, a prisoner stabbed two other inmates in the dark of the sleeping quarters. Jakob Kolberg had been born in Danzig and deserted four times as a soldier before being incarcerated. He held no grudges against his victims. When asked why he had done what he had, he explained that "he was hungry". It was apparently an act of desperation – Kolberg had already sold part of his clothes in order to buy food.[33] However, his hunger may also have been influenced by the fact that the convicts had collectively refused to eat their food until they were granted what they thought was their right. The cook was eventually fired, but this did not end the complaints. In April 1727, several of the aforementioned leaders went as far as to beat up their old accomplice Abraham Bølge, who was now working as an assistant to the prison cook.[34] No one seems to have dared to testify against the men singled out by the visibly maltreated Bølge in court. A similar situation occurred in March 1728, when the convict Engelbrecht Almgrøn was brought before the naval court because he had audibly threatened to kill three fellow inmates. His actions turned out to be a tactic aimed at being placed in an isolation cell since he knew the other convicts were out to exact revenge on him: Almgrøn had abandoned a collective escape plan, and his fellow plotters had found out he was to blame and had threatened "that they would either hang him or break his neck". Realising he was already in a perilous position, he decided to reveal everything he knew, hoping it might buy him freedom – or at least safety. He explained that he rarely ate a full meal because three of the leaders among the convicts demanded part of his food. They had also taken what money he had, reasoning that it belonged to the collective and should be spent on buying brandy from the wardens. He had subsequently been forced to borrow money from the same men.[35]

The most important part of Almgrøn's revelations concerned the fact that four men among the ringleaders – ex-sailor Abraham Anthonisen along with the former soldiers Johan Christopher Pahl, Johan Andreas Eggers, and Arnold Wilhelm Osenberg, maintained an internal jurisdiction and court among the inmates.

31 Rigsarkivet, Admiralitetet (Søetaten), Overadmiralitetsretten, Standretsprotokoller, 1724–1727 (49), fol. 174.

32 Ibid., fol. 172.

33 Ibid, fol. 174 and 138.

34 Ibid., fol. 290–291; Rigsarkivet, Holmens chef (Søetaten), Standretssager 1727, Complaint signed by Abraham Bølge, 11 April 1727.

35 Rigsarkivet, Admiralitetet (Søetaten), Overadmiralitetsretten, Standretsprotokoller, 1727–1732 (50), fol. 97–98.

Osenberg, originally from Frankfurt, conceded during the trial that he had acted as a judge and held an internal court, but he argued that it was a collective action in which everyone had had a part. He also admitted to having taken Almgrøn's food, but claimed to have in fact bought it with money given to him by friends from his time as a soldier. Another prisoner who testified that he had been punished by running the gauntlet among the convicts added much weight to Almgrøn's accusations, however. Along with Anthonisen, Eggers, and Pahl, Osenberg was sentenced to additional punishment for his "illegal and self-appointed authority".[36] Almgrøn was not released, however, and was subsequently tormented by his fellow convicts. At one point he grew so desperate as to attempt to stab another inmate so as to be brought before the court, where he stated that he would rather die than live on in the prison.[37]

Prison wardens did not always interfere in such situations – a fact owed in part to their frequent embroilment in convict politics. In 1727, a group including several of the leaders mentioned above was caught stealing iron from the worksites and selling via receivers in the city. When the court investigated, it discovered that the two prison wardens were in fact central to the scheme, as were men like Anders Christensen Ged and several others that had abetted the ploy. Ged's wife also acted as a fence for the iron. The wardens received life sentences for their involvement and exchanged their private quarters for the convict sleeping quarters as a result.[38] The group around Osenberg also stole. In late February 1729, a collective act of theft was revealed, though there was initially some confusion about who was behind it. In this window of uncertainty, the gang "deliberated internally and decided that two men should run and take the blame along with them." The choice fell on Osenberg and a fellow German, Jürgen Isenberg. A third ex-soldier, Jens Pedersen Slagter, had already designed an escape route from a worksite that the group had intended to use during the summer, perhaps because it was easier to be on the run in pleasant weather than in the freezing cold of early spring. Another convict forged passports for the two men, who escaped the prison but were ultimately caught.[39]

On its own, an escape like the one undertaken by Osenberg and Isenberg was nothing spectacular: At least 293 of the roughly 1,500 convicts in Trunken between 1690 and 1741 fled the prison at some point during their stay.[40] But the exits in

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., fol. 101.

38 Rigsarkivet, Generalauditøren, Justitsekstrakter 1722–1727 (11125), Admiralty court sentence, 10 November 1727.

39 Rigsarkivet, Generalauditøren, Justitsekstrakter 1728–1736 (11126), Sentence and resolution of admiralty court sentence, 14 July 1729.

40 For an overview, see Heinsen, *Mutiny*, ch. 5.

the 1720s were different. They were more orchestrated and clearly linked to an internal hierarchy that manifested in other ways as well. Over time, the admiralty grew keenly aware of this, and in the mid-1720s it began to pick out ringleaders and transfer them to other destinations – chiefly the stronghold of Kronborg and the small and desolate outpost of Christiansø in the Baltic.[41] The first group transferred in this fashion was one that had orchestrated an escape in 1723.[42] Anders Christensen Ged eventually ended up at Christiansø, as did Osenberg and Isenberg. But whenever the admiralty removed the top levels of inmate leadership from Trunken, there were always other men ready to step up who had studied their ways. Sometimes they were even more daring than their predecessors: Jens Pedersen Slagter, for instance, was chief among the inmates who worked to make a hole in the prison roof during the night in January 1730. The next day, the admiralty managed to get the convict Bent Tralmand to speak about the collective efforts he had witnessed the previous night. Eggers was among the prospective escapees, as were several men who had been involved in the beating of Bølge. Tralmand told the court that he had seen them make picklocks, write things on paper, and tamper with their irons. Perhaps he talked because he had already been suspected of having given up the scheme, or because he had previously been allowed a short leave to visit his wife. When he revealed the details of what had happened, his face was already bruised. In the sleeping quarters, two convicts had audibly discussed how to kill him, devising a plot to wait until dark when no one would be able to tell who had delivered the fatal blow. Everyone involved offered the same categorical explanation that they had indeed participated, but only as much as everyone else. For this reason, the court was unable to pick out ringleaders and had to resort to collective punishment: floggings and heavier irons.[43] This only made the convicts more eager to flee, of course. In September, another collective action revolving around the same core group was revealed. At least 16 men were involved in this plot, which consisted of digging a tunnel underneath the main entrance of the prison. They had made their way through the rock with a large spike stolen during their work loading a naval vessel. The plan had been pursued for at least six weeks, and when their tunnel was ready, the prospective escapees waited for the right moment. Their idea was to

41 The labour at these institutions is discussed by David Høyer, "Udenværkernes forandring 1818–1821," *Årbog Helsingør Kommunes Museer*, 2011: 43–44; Ingeborg Dalgas, *De bremerholmske jernfanger og fangevogtere på fæstningen Christiansø 1725–1735* (Aarhus, 2014).

42 Rigsarkivet, Admiralitetet (Søetaten), Overadmiralitetsretten, Standretsprotokoller 1722–24 (48), fol. 194–195.

43 Rigsarkivet, Admiralitetet (Søetaten), Overadmiralitetsretten, Standretsprotokoller, 1727–1732 (50), fol. 248–252.

take a boat at Nyhavn and row to the fishing villages north of Copenhagen, where they hoped to steal a larger boat and make it to Sweden. During their interrogations, they justified their actions with the brutality of the new warden, who beat them during their work no matter whether they "deserved it or not, which happens in drunkenness".[44]

Perhaps the largest such escape attempts occurred in 1732. In both cases, the leaders were inmates who had been part of the plots two years before, working with men like Slagter and Eggers. Now they were realising their own plans. We know somewhat less about these plots because no detailed interrogation records are preserved. However, the sentence passed after the first attempt in September 1732 reveals a plan similar to the tunnelling attempt in 1730: A group of men had worked on an escape tunnel since Whitsun, yet none of the participants was willing to say who had orchestrated the work and what the plan had been. Only an uninvolved convict who had overheard a conversation revealed enough that the court could reconstruct the group's plan to "break through the warehouse, go to the fishing villages and take a vessel and to go to sea, where they wanted to take the first and best vessel they could in order to sail on, which is clearly an intention of murder." This time, they pardoned the informant "in consideration of the threat to his life".[45] The following month, a group of sailors heard leaders among the convicts talking with each other during their work: "They wanted to break out and do so much that it should echo around the world." The men made their attempt during one of the subsequent nights by breaking a hole in the roof, but a guard post outside forced them back. This time, the details of the scheme were revealed by a convict who had actively been encouraged to spy on the prospective escapees. He was subsequently released.[46] The official correspondence relating to these cases reads like the product of anxious thoughts. It was not just escape, but "rebellion" and "mutiny". Naval authorities subsequently conjured up new ways to stifle potential prison breaks: One innovation was the adoption of chain gangs, which were to be used during the morning and evening marches to and from the worksites from 1732 onwards. They were likewise to be employed inside the prison when the inmates' "behaviour appears secretive".[47]

In light of these events, de Thurah's explanation for why Trunken was abandoned at the height of the period of prison expansion seems highly plausible. While the institution had always seen endemic escapes – as evidenced by its initial

44 Ibid., fol. 291–292. On the power of wardens to apply physical force at this institution, see Heinsen, "Penal Slavery."

45 Rigsarkivet, Generalauditøren, Justitsekstrakter 1728–1736 (11126), Various sentences and resolutions passed from late September to early November 1732.

46 Ibid., Court minutes, 24 October 1732.

47 Ibid., Resolution, 12 November 1732.

rebuilding in 1640 – the events of the 1720s and 1730s were on a different scale. Most importantly, escape had taken on a decidedly collective dimension, with convicts collaborating to flee in large groups and enforcing internal discipline.

Evolving responses

As mentioned before, the 1720s saw authorities in Copenhagen respond to the unrest in Trunken by trying to displace ringleaders among the convicts. Many of the men named on the previous pages were transferred, but each time those who remained behind were joined by newcomers to form new groups. Nevertheless, the practice of displacement grew into a staple of the prison system during this period, and it remains an important strategy for dealing with escapees even today. As the eighteenth century went on, the fortresses of Kronborg in Helsingør and Nyborg on the island of Funen became the main institutions for incarcerating individuals who ran repeatedly from other locations. It was not that these prisons were harder to escape from than Stokhusslaveriet – rather, the practice seemed rooted in the logic of trying to break up groups and place people in surroundings they were less familiar with. At Kronborg and Nyborg, convicts generally performed the same types of labour they had in Copenhagen, primarily in the maintenance of military infrastructure. And like at Stokhusslaveriet, they were under the management of military officials. In 1803, a rasphouse erected during the 1770s in the closed-off courtyard of Denmark's largest prison workhouse located in the Copenhagen neighbourhood of Christianshavn was outfitted as a maximum-security prison for those who repeatedly broke out of the slaveries. The prison workhouse had traditionally been viewed as a punishment unfit for male felons, but these notions were gradually abandoned over the course of the late eighteenth century, and the rasphouse at Christianshavn effectively came to form the lowest tier within the prison system.[48] This also meant that the bifurcated strands of the prison system began to converge. Like the workhouse it was a part of, the rasphouse was designed around the concept of intramural labour and not managed by the military. The inmates' labour consisted of rendering colonial dyewoods into fine grain from which the colour could be extracted. This development thus represented not only a transfer from one institution to another but a shift in the type of convict labour deemed most suitable for those considered dangerous in the eyes of the authorities. It was motivated by the belief that the building itself was ideal for the purpose of keeping convicts prone to flight in check,

48 Valentin, *Feelings*.

given that the structure was physically nestled within the rest of the prison and therefore much harder to escape from. Furthermore, rasphouse inmates lived and worked in cells, an exception in early modern prisons. Compared to the slaveries, escape rates from prison workhouses had been negligible during the late eighteenth century, so the assumption was not unfounded.[49] The building complex worked against escape attempts, whereas slaveries offered ample opportunities for flight.

The military authorities in charge of the slaveries had urged for this change, with the most persistent trail of requests coming from the fortress of Kronborg in the 1780s. It was not because the convicts were not considered useful there: At the time, the high demand for labour to construct an effective perimeter against the onslaught of the sea itself prompted a large influx of convicts to Kronborg from other institutions, especially the main slavery in Copenhagen. As had been the case in the 1720s and 1730s, however, the men transferred were usually selected because they were troublemakers. The fact that the labour performed at Kronborg was also more taxing than that in Copenhagen further increased the tensions, and the sources sometimes suggest the convicts felt the food at the fortresses was worse than in Copenhagen as well.[50]

Again, we can trace evolving groups with recurring characters that acted collectively to challenge their confines. One key event was a revolt at Kronborg in 1780 that prompted the commandant to request that convict Andreas Fackler be moved to the Christianshavn facility. He was told his hopes were in vain, however, and that Fackler should instead be "tamed" through "hard labour".[51] From fragments of correspondences, we know that Fackler had been involved in a large-scale collective breakout attempt early that year. More than 25 inmates had worked together, aided by two soldiers. Passports had been forged, but the plot was revealed when a convict informed the authorities – which apparently prompted a prisoner named Anders Pedersen to try to murder the informer. While Pedersen was executed for his attempt, the informer was pardoned and given a sizable reward of 20 rigsdaler, albeit on the premise that he would be deported out of the

49 For the period from 1769 to 1800, Emilie Luther Valentin has identified 111 escapes on the basis of more than 12,000 individual stints in the institution. Valentin, *Feelings*, 259.

50 Rigsarkivet, Generalauditøren, Auditøren for Kronborg Fæstning, 1716–1912, F. Justitsprotokoller, 1752–1770 mm., 3–4, 112; Rigsarkivet, Generalauditøren, Auditøren for Nyborg Fæstning, F. Justitsprotokoller, 1760–1786 (3), 253.

51 Rigsarkivet, Generalauditøren, Auditøren for Kronborg Fæstning, F. Slavesager, 1698–1794, letter from Generalitetskommissariatet to the commandant of Kronborg, 28 August 1781.

Danish king's territories. Meanwhile, a large group of the conspirators – among them Fackler – were punished with floggings and heavier irons.[52]

But Fackler was not to be "tamed" by lashing, shackles, or labour: He once more figured centrally in a rebellion occurring in 1785 that led to the execution of yet another convict, Florian Raab. Here, too, the lack of preserved interrogation records renders the details murky, though a short account from the early twentieth century contains more details than the currently available sources, suggesting that the minutes still existed at that time. What seems clear is that Raab shot a soldier with the soldier's own rifle after a work gang confronted an officer they considered to be treating them harshly. Furthermore, in the morning before the shooting, the convicts had called the officer a thief, as he was rumoured to have appropriated work materials and to have used prisoners as helpers in these instances of theft. This confrontation led to the arrest of six of the inmates who had abandoned the worksite altogether at this point. Later that day, the rest of the roughly 40 convicts in the fortress refused to work in solidarity. They were herded back into the prison yard, which was located directly inside the building's main gate. Moments later, the crown prince – on the first leg of a round trip to inspect all of Denmark's fortresses – entered through the gate. The convicts made a terrible noise as he passed them, and they demanded that the future monarch should listen to their complaints. The situation escalated as the inmates attempted to tear down the palisades and the guards began trying to force them back inside with their bayonets. It was at this point that Raab grabbed the gun of a soldier who was trying to shut the door. The bullet went through his neck and killed him.[53]

During a series of interrogations, Raab apparently changed his story several times. The minutes of the last of these sessions are preserved: Raab claimed it had been three other convicts he had been arrested with that had instructed him what to say, and that these men had caused the entire incident in the first place. Fackler was among them, and he found himself among the 7 convicts sent back to Copenhagen that year as punishment for his involvement. By this time, Raab had already been executed. According to older accounts, he had been offered a pardon but refused it; in the preserved interrogation record, he said that he would also find it acceptable if he was to keep his life, "however sorry it may be".[54]

52 Rigsarkivet, Generalauditøren, F. Justitsprotokoller, R, 1771–1796, #117.

53 K. C. Rockstroh, *Slaverevolten paa Kronborg 1785* (Frederiksborg: Frederiksborgs Amts Årbog, 1936), 19–20.

54 Rigsarkivet, Generalauditøren, Auditøren for Kronborg Fæstning, 1716–1912, F. Justitsprotokoller, 1752–1770mm (4), 16–17.

Like in Trunken in the 1720s and 30s, these collective escape plots appear linked, with one feeding into another. And even with Fackler and his compatriots transferred, the escape attempts continued. In February 1788, another substantial attempt unfolded that only failed when one of the first convicts to exit a makeshift hole in the palisades became stuck, blocking the exit.[55] A few weeks later, on 17 March, several of the men involved in the February undertaking were pivotal in a particularly dramatic incident unfolding at the Helsingør quarter known as Lappen, a maritime district to the northwest of the fortress and north of the city itself. Lappen was populated by a motley of inhabitants including fishermen and ferrymen, and a large group of more than a dozen convicts had been working there for some time. We do not know exactly what their work consisted of, but it involved harrows, pickaxes, and shovels and took place near a large gate. A few days earlier, while working, the inmates had spotted two Swedish boats nearby that seemed perfect for an escape attempt. Explaining their motivations before the court, a convict later described the temptation: After seeing the boats, he said, "it was no wonder that they could imagine to seek their freedom", adding that "anybody could easily reckon that a convict will make an effort to be free." Another of the prisoners in the gang described how he had been thinking to himself for days that "if anybody runs, I will run too." As usual, they refused to identify an instigator or the person who had been the first to act during the interrogations. Nevertheless, in a sudden and seemingly coordinated move, twelve men had rushed for the boats. An alarm to apprehend them was sounded, but they managed to reach one of the vessels. As they unmoored it, some shouted "hurrah" while others greeted those left behind, wishing them a "merry summer". As they neared the open water,[56] a group of ferrymen launched a boat in pursuit. One convict acted as the captain of the escape vessel. We know very little about him besides his name – Ploghöfft – and that he had also been involved in the escape attempt only a few weeks earlier that ended when his fellow inmate Schultz became stuck in the palisades. Ploghöfft urged his fellow convicts on, threatening to strike those who did not work to their best ability as well as the prisoner manning the rudder if he did not steer the boat properly. One of them would later describe how Ploghöfft "worked ferociously and that he wanted the rest to do the same". Yet despite their efforts, the ferrymen came closer. When they were within shouting distance, they demanded that the convicts drop their tools and surrender. Ploghöfft exclaimed "God damn (Pinedöd) every man dead or to Sweden." The ferrymen fired a warning shot, and when this had no effect, the next shot was

55 Ibid., 127.
56 Ibid., 129–130.

aimed directly at the escapees. Ploghöfft was shot dead. His last words are reported as "Oh God, I've had enough!" Another convict was severely wounded, and many of the others suffered smaller pellet wounds. Unable to retaliate in any meaningful way, they surrendered, throwing their makeshift weapons and oars overboard, and were towed back.[57]

The fact that convicts kept working in the area caused unease, however, and a year and a half later, three of the ferrymen at Lappen lodged a formal complaint with the commandant that the labouring prisoners had continually been threatening them since the incident. One event in particular, unfolding when a prison guard had allowed three convicts some brandy in an inn after they had finished their work assisting some bricklayers, had unsettled them. The ferrymen explained that they "truly fear that these ungodly daredevils will insidiously assault us or haunt our homes, especially when they get drunk and see their opportunity, which is often given to them since the officers appear too powerless to control them." They suggested that the surviving participants of the escape attempt should be transferred elsewhere to ensure the security of the people at Lappen.[58] Several witnesses had been around that afternoon and had heard various utterings from the convicts. One of the inmates – a Hungarian former mercenary soldier by the name of Joseph Zerringer, who seems to have been central to the original escape attempt – had been heard by a guard saying to a ferryman that "if not for these ferrymen, we would have been gone and in the war," referring to the ongoing Baltic conflict between Sweden and Russia.[59] The innkeeper noted that the convicts had said "they cared a lot about Lappen, which he deduced to mean nothing good, but that they said it because some of the inhabitants there had pursued them when they deserted." He had asked them to calm down as they had approached another ferryman in the inn, repeatedly asking him if he had been among those who had apprehended them, to which he had replied no.[60] The prisoners themselves denied having said these things, but Zerringer admitted that when one of the ferrymen had approached them he had said "shut up about that, we had been satisfied that the Devil had taken both you and the Swedish boat."[61]

57 Ibid.

58 Rigsarkivet, Generalauditøren, Auditøren for Kronborg Fæstning, F. Sagsakter 1752–1801 (1), Memorial of ferrymen Ole Nielsen Kudsk, Lars Hansen Hyre, and Engelbreth Andersen, 24 September 1789.

59 Ibid., Deposition of Martin Beyer, 26 September 1789.

60 Ibid., Depositions of Lars Hansen Beckmann and Niels Mossen, 21 October 1789.

61 Ibid., Deposition of Joseph Zerringer, 26 September 1789.

These events were followed by renewed but initially futile attempts to transfer ringleaders to the rasphouse. Eventually, however, policymakers saw the sense in the repeated calls to place the most unwieldy convicts in the high-security ward inside the prison workhouse at Christianshavn – and the small building within the larger workhouse thus came to hold the most daring escapees in the Danish realm.

For a time, this change in policy seemed to do the job, but then things came to a head. On 25 June 1817, terrible noises resonated through the streets of Christianshavn, and curious crowds began to form in the streets around the prison workhouse. In the square in front of the building itself, a crowd stood on the opposite side, pushed back by soldiers, while convicts hurled bricks, tools, and insults from inside at those coming too close. There was "a chaos of voices",[62] and the entire city was on high alert. Soldiers began firing their rifles at the revolting inmates, who had occupied the entire prison complex. The artillery joined in. A student who witnessed the events remarked: "I can ensure you that a cannon shot in the middle of a city fired towards one of its houses during a rebellious tumult sounds very different from any other shot I have ever heard."[63] The noise was terrifying. Flames started rising up as the convicts set the prison church on fire, while groups of policemen and soldiers chased through the streets searching for small groups who had managed to escape the prison before the siege. The student witness remarked how he had noticed something was up because he had been disturbed during his studies by the sound of a horse galloping down the street outside. From his window he saw a bald man on a stolen military horse riding so hard that sparks flew off the cobblestones. He was perplexed; "the horse was a reddish brown", but so was the man himself. At a distance, rider and mount blended together to form the likeness of a "complete centaur". Another bald-headed reddish man armed with a club – a "Hercules", as the witness described him – followed on foot with two soldiers in pursuit.[64]

The red men were obviously rasphouse inmates, their skin coloured by the dye. The rebellion had originated among this lowest class of convicts, who had whispered, conspired, and coordinated for months. To the Copenhageners in the streets outside, it appeared like a sudden explosion, but it was the result of tensions that had grown over a long period – and were ultimately tied to the change in 1803. For what the authorities had effectively created within the rasphouse was a think tank: Slowly but steadily, the convicts transferred there had tested

62 Carl Bernhard, *Samlede Skrifter*, 14 vols. (Copenhagen: Schubothes Boghandel, 1871), 72.
63 Ibid., 78.
64 Ibid., 68–70.

out every circuitous way towards freedom. A few attempts had succeeded, most had failed – but the inmates grew ever more daring in the process. Meanwhile, conditions inside the prison seem to have deteriorated. Denmark's involvement in the Napoleonic Wars emptied the state coffers, which – coupled with rampant inflation – had a direct impact on living conditions inside the prison workhouse. Its management had also changed, with a former military commander placed in charge of the institution who implemented martial forms of corporal punishment to maintain discipline.[65] There were recurrent hunger strikes, and everyday relations grew harsher and more violent. In this way, like at Trunken in the 1720s and Kronborg in the 1780s, worsening material conditions once again influenced the collective processes taking place among the inmates.

The first major escape attempt occurred in the summer of 1815: Following an impromptu hunger strike,[66] a large number of inmates tried to force their way through the gate, where they were met by soldiers. Fifty convicts managed to escape, but all were caught. During the subsequent investigations, the prisoners voiced their complaints centred around three recurring themes: first, the food; second, the violence and arbitrary character of physical punishments; third, the practice of shaving convicts' hair, which was considered a form of humiliation besides making them look distinct. Notably, they did not complain about the labour itself, much like the previous waves of large-scale collective action explored here had not been directed at the work but rather at the circumstances under which it took place. This does not mean that the hardships of prison labour did not prompt action – but it suggests that more was needed for such issues to snowball.[67] While their motivations are always difficult to interpret, this suggests that convicts acted in accordance with a moral economy, and that grievances gained momentum when the thresholds defined by this moral economy were perceived to be violated.

In the case at hand, there was no stopping the avalanche. A further attempt during which inmates plotted to attack the prison guards and break out using

65 Valentin, *Feelings*, 279.

66 For more on the events themselves, see Jens Engberg, *Dansk Guldalder eller Oprøret i Tugt-, Rasp- og Forbedringshuset 1817* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Rhodos, 1973). Engberg's account is wrapped in a Marxist interpretative framework that simplifies the event and fails to link it to the developments in the prison system. However, his presentation of the incident itself is based on the vast records produced in its wake. The following account of the 1817 prison revolt is based on Engberg's work unless otherwise noted. For another description similarly indebted to Engberg's work, see Ulrik Langen, *Tyven: Den utrolige historie om manden, der stjal guldhornene* (Copenhagen: Politikens Forlag, 2015).

67 For examples of convicts explaining their escapes with the hardship of their labour, see Rigsarkivet, Generalauditøren, Auditøren for Kronborg Fæstning, F. Justitsprotokoller, 1752–1770mm (4), 104; Rigsarkivet, Generalauditøren, Auditøren for Nyborg Fæstning, F. Justitsprotokoller, 1760–1786 (4), 367.

their keys took place later the same year. This plan originated among men who had already escaped from the slaveries several times, indicating that these were the types of fantasies conjured up by seasoned escapists. Their apprehension led to unrest in the rest of the prison, with convicts in other tiers becoming unruly as well. In one ward, they barricaded themselves in and only gave up when soldiers arrived and began shooting at them. Two men were sentenced to death. They had been vocal about their demands: the release of their leaders.

On 7 April 1817, several of the men involved in the 1815 events acted again. During the night, a large group of rasphouse prisoners broke out of their fetters and then out of their cells, pulling socks over their shoes to be able to walk silently. In the yard, they managed to tie up a guard. Several sets of keys had been forged in preparation, and the men were able to unlock the inner gate – but not the second one that would have led them out into the street. Instead, they hid in the yard, perhaps hoping to rush out if someone happened to be let through the gate. The following morning, however, they were all apprehended and confined to solitary cells, which they likewise tried to escape – a plot that was only discovered after they had managed to break through a wall separating two of the cells.

The core of this group were experienced prison breakers. One of them was a man by the name of Jens Christensen Mellerup, who had been put in a local prison workhouse in Jutland during his early youth on an account of theft. After his release, he stole again and was subsequently sentenced to slavery at Nyborg, where he made his first escape. He was apprehended and eventually ended up in the rasphouse.[68] Mellerup had been involved in the 1815 episodes as well. His cellmate was Christian Anders Olsen, who had been a smith's apprentice in his youth and forged the keys for the failed attempt to flee. Olsen had been in several local prisons before ending up in Copenhagen's slavery, from which he escaped. Now he was doing time in the rasphouse as well. At night, the pair had been visited several times by a third convict named Niels Olsen, who occupied the neighbouring cell but had figured out a way to unlock its door at night. He seems to have been the mastermind behind the plans. We know that it was he who had studied the guards' patterns in order to surprise them. He had originally been a conscript sailor but had committed theft which had gotten him into prison – and he had likewise escaped from several different prisons before ending up in the rasphouse.[69]

All three were transferred back to the rasphouse ward in late spring. Meanwhile, their fellow convicts had been working on a tunnel that enabled another

68 Rigsarkivet, Generalauditøren, Auditøren for Nyborg Fæstning, F. Justitsprotokoller, 1800–1818, 164.

69 Landsarkivet for Sjælland, København Stokhus, Slaverulle, 1774–1826, Entry for Christian Anders Olsen, 3 May 1810.

mass escape. They had also begun coordinating efforts with other groups. Messages circulated within the prison in ingenious ways: Some were relayed orally in code, while others were written down on scraps of paper or linen, sometimes using blood as ink. By wrapping such a scrap around a pebble, it was possible to transmit it to other wards with a pea shooter. The language of these messages is telling: It is one of solidarity, addressing "comrades" and "brothers in misfortune". The plan for the insurrection itself is somewhat diffuse. Apparently, the original digging plot was abandoned for a more direct approach featuring a veritable uprising. This was the reason why extensive communication was necessary: The rasphouse convicts needed to make sure that the inmates in the other wards would join in – even those in the correctional ward, who only served short sentences. When Niels Olsen was transferred to the prison infirmary, it presented a chance to find allies. Signs were arranged that would allow the various wards to rise up at the same time.

The plan was leaked, however. The authorities installed additional guards and apprehended one of the suspects in the correctional ward. As he was led across one of the prison yards in the morning of 25 June 1817, he yelled to the rasphouse convicts that he was being put into detention. Within minutes, the latter emerged from their ward armed with heavy clubs fashioned from the dyewoods themselves. A guard was assaulted and his keys taken from him. Moments later, everyone was out of their cells and wards. Fourteen men managed to escape the prison complex, but because the guards had been alerted beforehand, the gates were sieged before more inmates could exit. The plan may have included more than just escape in the first place, however: One of the rasphouse prisoners was later quoted as having said that "not one stone of this building shall stay on top of the other." While other convicts began hurling everything they could find out of the barred windows at the soldiers below, Mellerup's gang made their way to the attic, where they managed to start a fire.

Over the course of the following hours, the inmates tore the inside of the building apart. A few couples among them also used the occasion for a rare physical encounter. Meanwhile, others pilfered the prison stores. A few were hit by soldiers' bullets. But the original plan of mass escape was clearly unfeasible, and the fire eventually drove the prisoners out of the building complex, forcing them to surrender to the soldiers outside. All escapees were also caught. The man on the horse seen by the student witness – his name was Christian Brinck, a former Kronborg convict sentenced for assault on two officers – made it all the way out of the city, where his mount reportedly died from exhaustion. He was also apprehended. All convicts were bound around their legs with their arms tied behind their backs; they were kept under military guard on the ground in the courtyard of the naval workhouse. The city itself was under lockdown.

A military tribunal was convened immediately. It worked non-stop for forty hours to interrogate every single involved convict, after which the judge sentenced seven insurgents to death. They were executed on 28 June. Only one of the seven played the part of the penitent sinner, while the rest refused.[70] Mellerup scorned the hangman who had grabbed him by the neck: "Then by the Devil, I at least know that my head is still mine," he reportedly said. The city had been turned into an "amphitheatre", with every elevated spot occupied by onlookers. The banks teemed with people, and even the roofs of churches had become impromptu spectator stands.[71] Every Copenhagener knew the story of the rioters: Not only had rumour travelled "like an avalanche" during the three days that had passed, but the event itself had literally echoed through the streets.[72] The tribunal was subsequently transformed into an ordinary commission that continued investigating the events. In October, another seven inmates were executed, and many others were punished with floggings or had their sentences extended.

Fig. 2.1: Two prisoners, both serial prison breakers, and two guards at the maximum security prison at Kastellet. Drawn by Martinus Rørbye, c. 1832, courtesy of Statens Museum for Kunst.

70 Bernhard, *Samlede Skrifter*, 88–89.
71 Aarhuus Stifts Kongelig alene privilegerede Adresse-Contoirs Tidender, som forsendes med Brevposten, 11 July 1817.
72 Bernhard, *Samlede Skrifter*, 88–89.

The events of 1817 prompted another fundamental change in the Danish prison system – once again revolving around the question of what to do with the convicts most prone to escape. In the aftermath, new facilities were needed to replace the partly destroyed prison at Christianshavn, which led to the establishment of a new maximum-security prison near Copenhagen's fortress. What sets this institution apart is that it was the first prison designed not around concerns of productivity, but instead solely as a way of ensuring "security". In the planning phase, the idea was that the occupants of this special prison were not to work at all, since any method of making them productive would compromise security (see Fig. 2.1). This created a new problem, however, as authorities figured that the prisoners would use their idle hours to devise escape plans. They were therefore ultimately put to the simple task of picking oakum. Although this could be done effectively using tools, the latter were forbidden due to the risk they posed.[73]

Conclusion

The maximum-security prison created after the 1817 rebellion was not the coming of the modern penitentiary: It lacked some of the purposeful architecture of surveillance and the constant emphasis on individual isolation that defined the ambitions of later institutions. Nevertheless, it certainly foreshadowed them with its focus on security rather than on the extraction of useful labour. In this sense, it completed an arc in which a prison system created in the sixteenth century from the scraps of a conscription scheme targeting vagrants developed slowly but steadily into one where the impetus of labour was secondary to other aims. Read as a result of a struggle, this can only be understood as a defeat on the part of the authorities, who failed in their sustained efforts to turn the poor and the criminal into a resource for the state. However, as many of the escape attempts discussed in this chapter failed – often leading to detrimental consequences for the convicts themselves – it should not be read as a history of subaltern triumph or an abstract celebration of agency either. The main driver sustaining this prolonged arc were not notions of what prison should ideally be like, but simply the reactions of authorities faced with holes in walls and broken fetters – and these responses created institutions that were successively harder to escape from. The modern penitentiary that was imported from abroad by the 1850s might have come anyway, not least for the reason that penal modernisation became a matter of international political prestige for

73 Lis Ekelund Nielsen and Palle Tolstrup Nielsen, *Danmarks Værste Fængsel: Om Krudttårnsfangerne i Kastellet 1817–47* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2005).

Western European policymakers as the nineteenth century went on. Yet the slow and gradual changes implemented in the Danish penal system until that point – several of which echo to this day – cannot be accounted for without taking the tensions as traced in this chapter seriously. First and foremost, they were reactions.

In broader terms, this also suggests that a social history of coercion and immobilisation needs to account for the ways in which such practices produce generative sites of contestation. While labour coercion makes workers out of human beings and immobilisation – as a ubiquitous part of such practices – places those workers in designated sites or propels them along defined trajectories, such processes of transformation are open-ended: The people they create are more than just workers, and they remain individuals. For this reason, we cannot study coercion without considering how autonomy contributes to historical change.