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Paths of Escape: Desertion in the Danish-Norwegian Army in the Late 18th Century

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THESIS REPORT IN HISTORY

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Introduction

Lars Hansen, a soldier already sentenced to life as a penal slave at Akershus Fortress, escaped in the summer of 1783. Together with another slave, Helge Helgesen, he fled during midsummer. The two fugitives wandered the countryside for some time, avoiding capture. In the spring of 1786, they reunited and continued their journey toward Hadeland. There, during the night of March 23, 1786, they broke into the farm Jgelsrud in Jevnaker parish and committed a major burglary. Helge later managed to escape again and was never captured. Lars Hansen, however, was apprehended, brought to trial, and held solely responsible for the crime.[1]

This was just one of the many cases from late 18th-century Denmark-Norway where soldiers attempted to flee military life. Many soldiers had hoped that military service would be the stable path or escape from poverty that they had dreamed of, but far from it. Militæry life was a way into a world marked by poverty, rigid control, and a constant threat of punishment. Soldiers had to endure poor living conditions, unpredictable pay, and long periods of enlistment, while being bound by contracts that gave them little hope and say in their own future. In many cases, they were recruited through coercive or deceptive means, only to find themselves trapped in a system that bore a striking resemblance to forced labor, some didn't even try to get enlisted but wanted to only to receive the payment for signing up and then leave, something that not always was so clear cut of a mission. Furthermore, the army's disciplinary regime also relied heavily on public and physical punishment. These punishments ranged from flogging to running the gauntlet, or even life sentences of penal servitude, something we see in Lars Hansen's case. The punishments were set in place, not only to punish, but to discourage others from doing the same. While these were set in place to produce order, this show of violence also often created fear and resentment. Therefore, for many, desertion became a final attempt to reclaim freedom in a system that offered few alternatives. However, this is not a part of history that has been passed by, as many have worked on this topic of soldiers deserting from the army, whether modern or old. Even the Danish army in the 1800s has been studied before, where researchers have tried to scope every nook and cranny. What remains to be explored closer is the time between a soldier's desertion and the point at which they were caught. To look more closely at

[1] Riksarkivet, Akershus festning auditøren, Justisprotokoll, 1785-1808

that journey, not just as a moment of escape, but as a process shaped by people, places, and things along the way. By focusing on these movements in a qualitative way, the goal is to let the deserters' stories come through. Their choices were influenced by more than just personal will, they were shaped by the networks they moved through and also lived in, while also the conditions they faced during their escape.

Problem Formulation

This brings us to the desire to investigate and work with the topic of desertion in the Danish-Norwegian army in the late 1800 century. Then it comes to working with desertion in this period, the journeys of deserters are not the focus of researchers working on the field topic of desertion in the Danish-Norwegian army. Usually, the focus is on the lives of the soldiers or the punishments they receive after their escape attempt. Few comparative studies have previously been conducted on the course of events during the desertion attempts, which is where there is identified a gap in the existing knowledge is identified. This gap is what this paper aims to investigate: what actions do they take, where do they go, what do they do besides theft to survive, and how do the networks they live in influence the escape attempt? The focus is therefore on the choices they make when deserting. This study of desertion itself allows us to identify trends and deviations throughout the desertion process, as well as the variables that may exist across factors such as geography and social networks. Additionally, it provides an opportunity to examine and characterize the conditions among enlisted soldiers and whether these played a role in the desertion process, while also allowing us to investigate the coercive factors that may have led to soldiers deserting.

To examine this, the study will be based on *Justitsprotokoller* to analyze desertion. However, this also means that the perspective will be shaped by military courts, which interrogated the soldiers. These records come from Norway, Zealand, and Fyn. This knowledge can help paint a picture of the human conditions and circumstances that led soldiers to desert from the Danish army.

How and why did soldiers desert in Denmark-Norway in the late 18th century, based on selected judicial records?

Scope and Delimitation

The period under investigation, 1776-1803, was a transformative time for the Danish-Norwegian military because, during these years, efforts were made to restructure the army and

incorporate the land militia in an attempt to reduce costs associated with the large number of mercenaries that made up the military at the time. The start year is chosen for the earliest year in the used *Justitsprotokolls*. The end year is chosen as we see the 1802 Conscription Reform and the 1803 Army Reorganization Plan, as this started phasing out the mercenary soldiers, transitioning the army into a national force with mandatory military service.[2] Another reason for selecting this specific period is what Jeanette Kamp refers to as the "century of desertion," a time in history when a significant number of soldiers fled from their respective armies.[3] Therefore, when investigating soldier desertion, it makes sense to focus on the period when it was most common and where more cases are available for analysis. Research material on this topic is relatively limited, which has led us to base a significant part of the study on recognized Danish and international scholars in the field. This challenge has also resulted in greater emphasis on first-hand sources. The primary focus will be on judicial protocols from court-martial cases, allowing case comparisons. To create a more structured dataset, sources from legal protocols have been used, supplemented by Theodor Nübling's memoirs. While Nübling's memoirs will not be part of the dataset itself, they will serve to reinforce observations made from the protocols. This approach provides multiple perspectives in the analysis, incorporating both the military's viewpoint and the experience of an individual soldier involved in a desertion case.

Research Approach

With that groundwork laid, this study turns to a focused exploration of how soldiers deserted from the Danish-Norwegian army. The goal with this thesis is to investigate these desertions systematically, which will be done by collecting data from justisprotokoller and building a dataset that relies on detailed, qualitative descriptions rather than short categorical entries, seen in more empirical datasets. The dataset has been set up in columns showing the soldier's name, punishment, destination, escape method, motivation, and intended goal. While the dataset does allow for some level of quantitative analysis. Where the dataset shines through is

[2] Karsten Skjold Petersen, "Geworbne krigskarle. hvervede soldater i Danmark 1774-1803" p. 63
[3] Jeannette Kamp. Desertion in the Early Modern World. p. 57

when it shows the narratives it holds. It's designed to strike a balance between structured information and storytelling, making it valuable for the kind of historical information this thesis is looking for. This combination of data is important when we look at historical and sociological research, where we need to understand the individual's behavior, something that can not only be explained by numbers alone. By maintaining this narrative in each case, the study will be able to investigate the actions of the soldiers but also see a broader social context around them. Through close examination of court-martial records, the study will trace both broad patterns and individual stories, uncovering strategies, networks, and personal decisions. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) will be used to help frame these findings and support thematic comparisons across cases. A key reason for taking this more qualitative route is the concern that relying solely on quantitative data would not be able to truly investigate the experiences of the deserters go through their motivations, fears, and risks. Numbers can't fully convey the human side of these events. Therefore, to address this, there will be selected cases that will be analyzed more closely and used outside of the dataset. Looking at how the soldiers fled, the choices they made, and what helped them. By reconstructing these deserters' stories, this study aims to give a better understanding of what the soldiers were up against and the reason behind their actions. This approach allows for a deeper dive into the social and environmental situation that formed their decisions. This thesis ultimately aims to go beyond data, to get a look behind the humans, and the stories they tell. But this leads us to the core challenge, as the records weren't written by the deserters themselves, but by the military officials they served. These were officers and judges who had their own assumptions, priorities, and biases, something that did not help the soldiers. These sources are official documents that were created by the people in power and not the soldiers themselves. On top of that, many soldiers committed other crimes like theft or deception while fleeing, which gave them strong reasons to downplay or alter their stories in court. Since these testimonies were given under threat of punishment, they were often shaped by a desire to avoid further consequences. That means some parts of their accounts may have been exaggerated, hidden, or manipulated to appear more favorable to the authorities. Because of this, the data must be handled with care. The military records do offer valuable clues about desertion, but they can't be accepted at face value. Because of these factors, a critical reading is needed to sort out likely facts from the

distorted parts in the testimonies. By acknowledging these limitations, this study hopes to build a more thoughtful and balanced understanding of military desertion, one that is aware of the limits of the sources, but still tries to get closer to the human experiences behind the statistics.

Literature Review

To gain a deeper understanding of soldiers' desertion in the Danish-Norwegian army, the following section will explore different studies and historical works that have worked with the broader social and structured context of a soldier's life. This review will try to use this knowledge to help answer the question in the problem formulation

One of these researchers is Karsten Skjold Petersen, who in 2002 released his work *Geworbne krigskarle: Hvervede soldater i Danmark 1774-1803*, which is a revised version of his Ph.D. dissertation, focusing on the largely overlooked group of enlisted soldiers in the Danish army. While much research exists on recruited soldiers, Petersen offers some different knowledge regarding enlisted soldiers, portraying them as a nearly forgotten social group. Rather than focusing solely on traditional military operations or state policy, Petersen approaches the topic through social history. His analysis investigates the internal organization of the army and the day-to-day conditions faced by its enlisted men. To complement his source-driven analysis, he occasionally includes firsthand accounts, such as the personal writings of Theodor Nübling, such as the memoir *Otto år I Danmark*, which serve to humanize broader patterns and institutional structures. The Petersen's book functions as a foundational reference work, drawing on an extensive range of documents to explore topics from army discipline to the material realities of soldiering. Desertion is among the issues discussed in the book, but Petersen treats it more as a systemic problem and considering why it occurred and how the military tried to prevent it, rather than as a personal experience, something this thesis tried to do.

Going over to another work that will be used, we have Johan Heinsen and his work *Mercenary Punishment: Penal Logics in the Military Labour Market* (2023), which

explores penal practices in 19th-century Danish garrisons. The article explores how disciplinary measures were employed to manage mercenary conduct, highlighting the influence of wider societal values. It outlines the various forms of punishment used to enforce order among soldiers. By offering historical context, the article enhances our understanding of military discipline and aids in interpreting otherwise ambiguous data. While also showing the consequences of deserting. Heinsen's research reveals how military authorities sought to stop desertion through strict disciplinary measures, which not only reinforced the idea that leaving the service was not only difficult but also carried many risks. His work provides context for understanding how military discipline functioned.

Even if these papers are not about soldiers' desertion themselves, they cover the fields around it, therefore, it can be used to explain why soldiers flee from the army, while at the same time providing an insight into the social, economic, and disciplinary factors that contributed to soldiers fleeing military service. By giving the history of low wages, harsh living conditions, military discipline, and the legal consequences of disobedience, these works help paint a clearer picture of the networks that pushed the soldiers toward desertion. Understanding the struggles within the army allows for a deeper understanding of why some soldiers saw escaping as their only option, despite the risks involved. Having outlined the historical conditions that shaped the world of soldiers in 18th-century Denmark-Norway, we now turn to scholars who are more directly addressing desertion. While research specifically focused on Denmark-Norway is limited, studies from other European contexts offer insights and a way to investigate the deserters of Denmark-Norway.

One of those works comes from Piano and Rouanet's *Desertion as Theft* (2019) which explores desertion in 18th-century European militaries through the lens of economic property rights theory. In their work, they recognize desertion as widespread and socially condemned. The authors see it as soldiers taking back control of their own work that had been given to the state. Drawing on Barzel's (1997) framework, they argue that the link between labor and the individual's body makes perfect enforcement impossible, rendering desertion an challenge. Their empirical analysis, based on data from post-revolutionary France, reveals that desertion rates rise when where are alternative economic opportunities exist and enforcement costs are higher, with geographic terrain facilitating evasion (Forrest 1989). This approach

shows the economic institutional theory and military history by integrating transaction costs and property rights into desertion studies, supplementing prior social research on causes and variation. While Piano and Rouanet focus primarily on the economic logic of desertion in post-revolutionary France, their framework offers tools beyond that setting. Piano and Rouanet's work on geographic terrain, for example, opens new possibilities for exploring how soldiers deserted from the Danish-Norwegian army. At the same time, their approach aligns well with ANT, helping to show the network surrounding the deserters and the choices they make during their escape. Piano and Rouanet, with the help of ANT show that geography can be treated as a non-human actor, an idea that will be further developed in the analysis of how soldiers desert.

Forrest's work challenges the romanticized view of mass patriotic enlistment during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Between 1792 and 1814, France mobilized millions of men, but widespread desertion and draft evasion revealed deep rural resistance to conscription. Forrest explores how this resistance affected military effectiveness, public opinion, village life, and undermined Napoleon's goal of building a centralized state. Forrest's work will be used to demonstrate how desertion can be influenced by local communities and the social norms around them, something that will be used together with ANT, to open up new ways to analyze the desertions. He reveals that desertion wasn't just an individual act, but could be a community-embedded practice, where locals provided shelter or support. This highlights how human and non-human actors, terrain, social ties, and cultural values interact. Forrest's work will be used as a tool to help show how ANT helps unpack how desertion emerged from networks, rather than isolated choices. Both Piano and Rouanet's and Forrest will be better explained when we get further down the analysis, when we hit the how section to help refresh their work, and use it as an opener to answer how soldiers deserted.

Methodology

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is not a simple framework. It doesn't offer quick definitions or ready-made answers about what society is or how it works. Instead, ANT starts from a place of complexity and contradiction. It asks us to let go of traditional ideas about fixed structures like society, power, or context, and instead look closely at how things, people,

objects, and ideas come together in specific moments.[4] Because of this complexity, this text doesn't aim to give a complete or advanced explanation of ANT. Instead, it introduces the core ideas in a simplified way, based on five key uncertainties that Bruno Latour identifies. These uncertainties are not flaws in understanding; they're what ANT says we need to investigate more carefully if we want to understand the social world. The five key uncertainties that are introduced are:

- the nature of groups: there exist many contradictory ways for actors to be given an identity;
- the nature of actions: in each course of action a great variety of agents seem to barge in and displace the original goals;
- the nature of objects: the type of agencies participating in interaction seems to remain wide open;
- the nature of facts: the links of natural sciences with the rest of society seems to be the source of continuous disputes;
- *and, finally, about the type of studies done under the label of a science of the social as it is never clear in which precise sense social sciences can be said to be empirical.*[5]

ANT offers a way to look at the social world without taking anything for granted. Instead of assuming what groups, actions, or facts are, ANT asks us to follow how they come into being. And this is why there will be focused on these five key uncertainties presented: how groups are formed and change over time, how actions are shaped by many actors, both human and nonhuman, how objects play an active role in shaping interactions, how facts are created through social and material processes, and how social science itself needs to reflect on the categories it uses. Instead of starting with a fixed structure, I look at how things come together, who or what is involved, how actions happen between people and other forces, and how different versions of reality are created and worked out. By keeping these five uncertainties in mind, I can focus less on fitting my findings into standard categories and more on

[4] Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social : An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2023. p. 31
[5] Ibid p. 31-32

understanding the unique dynamics of the deserters I'm studying. By tracing the roles of both human and nonhuman actors in these decisions, I can better examine and analyze how soldiers' realities are shaped and disrupted through their interactions with people, networks, communities, environments, and geography.

Presentation of sources

In this thesis, the central sources will be the *Riksarkivet, Akershus festning auditøren, Justisprotokoll* (1785-1808), as well as those from *Generalauditøren, Auditøren ved 4. Dragonregiment: F. Justitsprotokoller* (1776-1804) and *Generalauditøren, Auditøren ved Den Kongelige Livgarde til Hest: F. Justitsprotokoller* (1779-1833) to construct the dataset. The reason for choosing these *Justitsprotokolls* comes from their placement in time as they all overlap in a 20-year period at the end of the 18th century. These protocols have had both strengths and weaknesses in their use as sources and as part of the dataset. Starting with the positive aspects, as stated on the Danish National Archives' own website, the *Justitsprotokollerne, also called "tingbøger", these are court and judgment records. They contain both criminal cases and civil cases.* [6] The Justitsprotokoller offer this thesis valuable insight into how crime was addressed in the late 18th century. They give light on the types of offenses that were common at the time among the soldiers, who were brought before the courts, and the punishments that followed. Beyond the surface-level data, these records make it possible to explore social and economic dynamics and how they influenced criminal behavior, as it was not always explicitly mentioned in the sources themselves. However, these sources also come with their limitations. Many of the entries in the *Justisprotokolls* don't have the whole story, as many of the interrogations, or preliminary judgments, were without follow-up or final rulings. This leaves gaps in the narrative and meaning that the data may not always reflect the outcomes of the cases, as not all information is present. Furthermore, the protocols are documented from the perspective of the authorities. Testimonies from the soldiers and

[6] Arkivalier online. (12-01-2025) *Justitsprotokoller, tingbøger og domprotokoller.* https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/da/other/other-collection/35

alternative viewpoints are few and, when they are included, they are often reduced to short notes. This imbalance is more evident when comparing Danish records to Norwegian ones, where the voices of the soldiers are slightly more present in the Norwegian. Despite these challenges, the *Justitsprotokoller* remains a strong tool in understanding soldiers' desertion during this period. As they give small glimpses into the journeys of the soldier who deserted, offering fragmented, but still insightful knowledge into the life of deserters across Denmark-Norway and beyond during this period.

Chapter 1: Desertion in 18th-Century Denmark-Norway: A Historical Outline

The Structure of the Danish Army in the Early Modern Period

The problem in raising an army at this time in Denmark's history lies in the *Stavnsbåndet* law. Recruitment within Denmark was limited by social and legal restrictions. The majority rural population was bound to the land after the 1733 *Stavnsbåndet* law, which tied unmarried men to their birth estates. As a result, estate owners provided local conscripts, while married peasants were managed through tenant contracts. Urban areas like Copenhagen were too small to supply enough soldiers, so Denmark relied heavily on foreign mercenaries, mainly from the German principalities. These recruits signed *kapitulation* contracts that bound them to eight years of military service without the option to resign.[7] To strengthen Denmark again by the mid-seventeenth century, the state had established an army of mercenary soldiers. Denmark had to have the strength to defend its territories at the time, Norway, the German duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, and its territories in Sweden.[8] Most of the mercenary soldiers in the Danish army were recruited from Germany, particularly from the Free Imperial City of Frankfurt, as organized recruitment was not legally permitted within Denmark. Maintaining a mercenary army was expensive, which led to extremely low wages, though recruits did receive free lodging.[9] These troops were typically stationed in garrisons near the Swedish border, in

[7] Johan Heinsen. "Mercenary Punishment: Penal Logics in the Military Labour Market": Introduction
[8] Ibid. Introduction
[9] Tyge Krogh, "Larcenous Soldiers" i Cultural Histories of Crime in Denmark, 1500 to 2000. p. 137

Copenhagen, and throughout the duchies.[10] Life in these locations was marked by poverty, limited personal freedoms, and strict discipline. Soldiers were required to always wear their uniforms and needed official permission to marry. Due to their low pay, many soldiers had to seek extra work, often in agriculture, while others had resorted to theft and petty crime for money, which fueled hostility from the locals. Their constant presence in uniform and dependence on civilian economies made them unpopular, not only with civilians but also with the military leadership.[11] Although they were enlisted as combatants, actual warfare was rare, particularly after the peace that came with the end of the Great Northern War.[12] Accounts at the time often depicted these men as violent, immoral, and socially undesirable, those who had only joined the military out of desperation after being rejected by their own communities. While there is some sources that present a more sympathetic view of the soldiers, most legal records and eyewitness testimonies emphasize these negative portrayals.[13]

Recruitment Process

In 18th-century Europe, armies filled their ranks through a mix of voluntary enlistment and forced recruitment. Most military forces were made up of mercenaries, this would later change as we see countries begin shifting toward national standing armies. Still, even these relied heavily on long-term mercenary contracts. This system was expensive but considered more stable in the long run.[14] Despite these efforts, countries like Denmark were often missing manpower and having manpower shortages during wartime, creating competition for recruits to sign.[15] Recruitment was usually centered in specific cities like Frankfurt am Main, where several nations ran enlistment offices. These urban centers became hotspots for attracting men of different nationalities and social backgrounds, often by appealing to their hopes for a better life or simply because they had no better options.[16] However, voluntary sign-ups rarely

[10] Johan Heinsen. “Mercenary Punishment: Penal Logics in the Military Labour Market”: Introduction
[11] Tyge Krogh, "Larcenous Soldiers" i Cultural Histories of Crime in Denmark, 1500 to 2000. p. 137
[12] Johan Heinsen. “Mercenary Punishment: Penal Logics in the Military Labour Market”: Introduction
[13] Karsten Skjold Petersen, “Geworbne krigskarle. hvervede soldater i Danmark 1774-1803” p. 19
[14] Kamp, Desertion in the Early Modern World, p. 52
[15] Ibid. p. 52
[16] Ibid. p. 50

met demand, so authorities frequently turned to coercion.[17] Forced recruitment came in many forms: some men were physically forced, others deceived with promises of high rank or generous enlistment bonuses known as *Handgeld*, and some were even conscripted as part of a court sentence.[18] The distinction between voluntary and forced service was often murky many recruits were misled about pay or role and ended up as low-ranking infantry despite promises to the contrary.[19] Civilians sometimes acted as unofficial recruiters, luring young men into service in exchange for a fee. Some even pretended to enlist themselves, while using stories of friendship and adventure to persuade others to join.[20] Although recruitment markets were regulated and against this practice at the local level, enforcement was uneven. In Frankfurt, for instance, laws tried to limit recruiters' behavior, but powerful states like Prussia often ignored these rules.[21]

Salary and Living Conditions

Soldiers in the Danish army were paid a fixed wage throughout their service. The amount varied depending on their rank and unit, and it was paid out every five days. This short pay cycle wasn't just administrative, it was intentional. The state hoped that frequent, smaller payments would prevent soldiers from gambling or drinking away large sums and make desertion harder to finance. Pay, however, was modest. A regular musketeer earned 6 skilling per day on paper, but 2 skilling went straight to cover bread rations, leaving only 4 skilling in actual cash.[22] Even the bread ration of about 650-750 grams per day was sometimes reduced during field exercises. Occasionally, soldiers were granted extra rations, but these were exceptions, not the rule.[23] Although the army covered housing and uniforms for active-duty soldiers, the quality of both left much to be desired. Uniforms were only issued once a year, meaning soldiers often walked around in patched, tattered clothing long before replacements were due.[24] Those who were

[17] Kamp, Desertion in the Early Modern World, p. 53
[18] Ibid. p. 50
[19] Ibid. p. 53
[20] Ibid. p. 53
[21] Ibid. p. 55
[22] Karsten Skjold Petersen, "Geworbne krigskarle. hvervede soldater i Danmark 1774-1803" p. 200
[23] Ibid. p. 201
[24] Ibid. p. 202

granted permission to leave active service temporarily, the so-called permiterede or *frifolk*, had better chances of earning a living, especially if they had a trade. But they also had more expenses, they had to pay for their own lodging and part of their uniforms, and they lost access to free food rations.[25] To supplement their basic income, soldiers could receive additional allowances, especially when assigned to extra duties. For instance, soldiers hunting deserters could receive 8 skilling per day, and if successful, they'd split a 2-rigsdaler bounty. Others earned small bonuses for fieldwork, guarding the sick, or training conscripts. Still, most of these extras were modest and irregular, and not enough to cover rising living costs.[26] The real opportunity to earn more came for those who were permitted to work civilian jobs. Permitted soldiers, the *frifolk*, could work as laborers, craftsmen, or assistants. In cities like Copenhagen, many found side work on construction sites or shipyards. A carpenter could earn 32-40 skilling per day in summer and 24-32 in winter, many times more than a soldier's army pay.[27] But this wasn't a perfect solution. Civilian workers often resented competing with soldiers, and some demanded that *frifolk* be the first to go in times of layoffs.[28] In the provinces, civilian work was harder to find. *Frifolk* had to get permission with a pass to seek jobs far from their garrison towns, and their movements were closely monitored. In theory, the regiment was responsible for making sure these men had employment, but in practice, this system was inconsistent.[29] Soldiers without a trade fared far worse. They were left to compete for unskilled day labor, hauling goods, cleaning, or standing on city corners hoping to be picked for odd jobs. One soldier, Nübling, recalled waiting with a rope around his waist, a sign he was seeking work, hoping to carry heavy loads for a few coins. On a good day, he could earn 80-96 skilling, enough to live well for several days. On a bad day, he'd go hungry and return to duty exhausted.[30] Despite their efforts, many soldiers couldn't make ends meet. Food prices rose while wages stagnated, forcing some into theft or begging. One contemporary observer described passing a soldier on

[25] Karsten Skjold Petersen, "Geworbne krigskarle. hvervede soldater i Danmark 1774-1803". p. 202
[26] Ibid. p. 205
[27] Ibid. p. 207-208
[28] Ibid. p. 207
[29] Ibid. p. 207
[30] Ibid. p. 209

guard who pleaded *"Lieber junger Herr, geben Sie nicht einem armen Soldaten einen Stüber?"* translated to Kind sir, won't you spare a poor soldier a coin?[31]

Discipline and Punishment

In early modern Denmark, military punishments were complex and rooted in legal codes and cultural norms. Rather than drawing a line between corporal punishment and imprisonment, the Danish army used a blend of both, often combining physical pain with public shame to maintain discipline and communicate moral. Soldiers could be subjected to corporal punishments. These punishments could include public whippings, branding, mutilation, and being placed on the wooden horse or the Spanish mantle. One of the most severe was running the gauntlet, where a soldier was forced to pass through rows of fellow soldiers who struck him with sticks. Despite the pain, this punishment did not result in legal dishonor because it wasn't carried out by an executioner. The reason for having this punishment was that it allowed the soldier to return to duty once healed, preserving his labor value and potential reintegration into the regiment. Discipline was also enforced through informal practices. Officers could administer immediate physical punishments called corrections for minor infractions. More serious arbitrary punishments were handed down by regimental commanders and included chaining soldiers in stress positions or forcing them to carry heavy weapons.[32] They were not as horrifying as running the gauntlet, but still worked to place discipline. Although soldiers had the right to request a formal trial, it was not a common thing to do since having an official record could lead to harsher punishments in the future, something many soldiers would like to avoid.[33] The most common crimes committed by soldiers were theft and desertion. When caught, they were judged according to civilian law but sentenced in the regiment's own court, where punishments were much harsher than for civilians.[34] These stricter rules often did not render the soldiers dishonorable, as pointed out before, but with this structure, it meant the soldiers could return to duty after serving their sentence. For minor infractions like missing a shift, a

[31] Karsten Skjold Petersen, "Geworbne krigskarle. hvervede soldater i Danmark 1774-1803". p. 212
[32] Johan Heinsen. "Mercenary Punishment: Penal Logics in the Military Labour Market": Violent Communication
[33] Ibid. Violent Communication
[34] Tyge Krogh, "Larcenous Soldiers" i Cultural Histories of Crime in Denmark, 1500 to 2000. p. 138-139

soldier might have his hands and feet bound together and be forced to lie in this position for a day or two. Others were made to stand barefoot on a pole for hours.[35] Theft, however, brought harsher penalties, running the gauntlet or, in some harsh cases, execution. Desertion, burglary at night, and stealing livestock in the field could also result in hanging. Those who were punished publicly often received life sentences of hard labor and were classified as dishonorable prisoners, excluded from royal pardons.[36] However, the harshest punishments, such as execution, were often commuted, since soldiers represented manpower, especially for military slavery. But desertion and theft were treated more seriously. Deserters could be punished even in their absence, during the desertion, with their names posted on the gallows to show their crime and its gravity. Even though hanging was rarely used in peacetime, the association with dishonor remained strong. By the mid-1700s, as Heisen points out, deserters were more often sentenced to life in military slavery instead of being executed, reflecting the shift toward preserving manpower.[37] Punishment in the army also served as a social function. It conveyed messages through public example, mirroring the crime. Authorities used these methods not only to maintain order but to reinforce the communal values. The communal nature of punishments, where fellow soldiers participated in enforcing discipline, could even generate sympathy while at the same time reduce stigma, further supporting reintegration.[38]

State Surveillance and the Control of Deserters in 18th-Century Denmark

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, the Danish state developed a system of civil and military control to prevent desertion and shape the movement of its soldiers. This control system combined physical barriers and legal restrictions, with a growing use of public media. Through the work of Johan Heinsen and Anders Dyrborg Birkemose, it becomes possible to see that wanted posters and announcements were not only a practical tool for locating individuals in the network of state surveillance. As Heinsen and Birkemose show, the concept of the wanted notices was not limited to criminal figures but extended to runaway workers, escaped

[35] Tyge Krogh, "Larcenous Soldiers" i Cultural Histories of Crime in Denmark, 1500 to 2000. p. 139
[36] Ibid. p. 139
[37] Johan Heinsen. “Mercenary Punishment: Penal Logics in the Military Labour Market”: Violent Communication
[38] Ibid: Violent Communication

prisoners, and, crucially, deserting soldiers. On gallows and fortress walls, the names of deserters were posted, and cannon fire was sometimes used to signal a recent desertion. These dramatic alerts were designed to notify both the public and the authorities of a soldier's escape.[39] The media played a large role in this system. As early as 1682, printed newspapers carried notices such as that of Johan Folmer, a wanted miller's apprentice. These early announcements established a format that became increasingly standardized. They included a physical description of the fugitive, a reward for capture, and a warning that harboring the individual would result in punishment.[40] This system became more widespread by the mid-18th century, mostly in Copenhagen. Newspapers like *Adresseavisen* regularly published these announcements, a trend driven in part by the anonymity of the growing urban population, as Heinsen and Birkemose note, printed notices allowed both private individuals and the state to extend their surveillance beyond the boundaries of their local communities.[41] This development also came with a centralization of control, as the state began to take over what had initially been a private practice carried out by ship captains, employers, or garrison commanders.[42] This growing public media and bureaucratic control, as explained by Heinsen and Birkemose, laid the foundation for a better surveillance system, and by the late 18th century, it significantly reduced the number of successful escapes. This shift marked the rise of modern surveillance. Though escape patterns remain familiar, successful escapes declined sharply. While 72.2% of escapees eluded capture in the early 1700s, that number fell to around 40% by the 1780s. This drop reflected the state's better control through stricter passport laws, standardized wanted notices, expanded policing, and public incentives for reporting fugitives. The state's presence reaching into fishing villages and urban centers alike made life more difficult for those attempting to live undocumented in Denmark.[43] At the same time, the Danish army implemented a more direct and physical form of control over its soldiers. According to Karsten Skjold's *Geworbne Krigskarle,* life in garrison towns was governed by constant surveillance. Soldiers were subject to curfews after the evening bell, and patrols were deployed

[39] Heinsen, Johan, og Anders Dyrborg Birkemose. "Efterlyst. Identitet, tvang og mobilitet, 1750-1850". *Temp - tidsskrift for historie*, bd. 14, nr. 27, 2023, p. 27
[40] Ibid. p. 27
[41] Ibid. p. 29
[42] Ibid. p. 29
[43] Heinsen, Johan, m.fl. *Det første fængsel.* Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2018. p. 70

at night to ensure compliance.[44] Civilians who housed soldiers were required by law to report unauthorized absences or face fines. Ramparts and guarded gates surrounded fortresses and towns, and harbors were tightly monitored, especially in Copenhagen. Escaping by sea was made difficult with the deployment of watch ships and winter ice patrols in Øresund, Storebælt, and the Elbe.[45] Recruits' passports, trade licenses, and other documents were confiscated and stored by officers to stop mobility, and soldiers were only paid every five days, to stop soldiers from saving money for an escape.[46] Due to repeated instances of desertion by boat, coastal communities were ordered to chain their boats and store oars and sails indoors.[47] The civilian population was also pulled into this control system. Citizens were legally obligated to report deserters and could be fined up to 30 rigsdaler for failing to do so, while those who reported deserters were promised *indbringerpenge,* a standardized reward of six rigsdaler.[48] Yet in practice, civilian informants were rare, and many ordinary people actively aided deserters instead.[49]

Swedish recruiters operating just north of Copenhagen further undermined the Danish military system by organizing desertion routes. Yet despite the nation's rivalry, Denmark and Sweden cooperated to combat desertion. Through mutual agreements, the two states exchanged escaped soldiers and fugitives, showing that they shared an interest in maintaining military discipline across the borders.[50]

Deserters who attempted escape by land needed to change their appearance, obtain civilian clothing, and acquire fake or stolen documents. Without a valid passport, travel was dangerous, as all movement was closely monitored by local officials and patrols.[51] Still, escape was not impossible and in some regions till possible. In Holstein, for example, the border could be reached in a single night's march, and many soldiers stationed there successfully fled.[52] When desertion was discovered, the military reacted swiftly. In

[44] Karsten Skjold Petersen, "Geworbne krigskarle. hvervede soldater i Danmark 1774-1803" p.141
[45] Ibid. p. 141
[46] Ibid. p. 141
[47] Ibid. p. 142
[48] Ibid. p. 142
[49] Ibid. p. 143
[50] Heinsen, Johan, m.fl. *Det første fængsel.* Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2018. p. 70
[51] Karsten Skjold Petersen, "Geworbne krigskarle. hvervede soldater i Danmark 1774-1803" p. 144-145
[52] Ibid. p. 145

Copenhagen, cannon shots signaled the alarm, and mounted patrols were sent out immediately.[53] If the deserter remained uncaptured, the soldier would be summoned three times by drum and ultimately tried in absentia. A symbolic execution followed his name was read aloud as he was hanged by proxy.[54] Even crossing into another country was not always safe. Denmark had extradition treaties with Hamburg, England, and other neighboring states, and Danish officers abroad were tasked with capturing deserters when found.[55] Nonetheless, enforcement varied, and pardons were sometimes issued to encourage voluntary return. These men could re-enter service but lost their rank, enlistment bonus, and seniority. Repeating offenses were treated more severely.[56]

[53] Karsten Skjold Petersen, "Geworbne krigskarle. hvervede soldater i Danmark 1774-1803" p. 145
[54] Ibid. p. 146
[55] Ibid. p. 146
[56] Ibid. p. 146

Chapter 2: Why - Fleeing the Regiment

Understanding the Decision to Desert

As we can see in the cases before, for many, military life was not the dream they had imagined. Yet, even when the soldiers no longer wished to remain in the army, leaving was not a simple option. Signing a contract with the military meant binding yourself to service for a long time, and for some this led to only seeing desertion as the only escape. Once enlisted, individuals became subject to rules that extended well beyond their control. Contracts were binding. Over time, these harsh conditions could begin to build frustration, and desertion began to seem like a possible, if dangerous way out. Yet choosing to flee came with its own risks. The act wasn't just about running away, as it was also about outsmarting a system designed to keep people in place. Surveillance was tight, punishments severe, and the environment often unfamiliar. Success demanded planning, having local knowledge, and some luck. Desertion took many forms, from extremely careful and thoroughly planned escapes to impulsive decisions made in a few short moments. What united these cases, however, was that the reasons were often deeply personal. Some deserted out of fear of punishment for minor infractions, while others simply saw no other way out of a life they hadn't freely chosen. The threat of brutal disciplinary practices such as running the gauntlet or being sentenced to penal labor often became the final push. That is why this first part of the analysis will explore the question of *why did soldiers desert*. To answer this, we will first examine the stories of three attempts. Their cases shed light on the difficult choices soldiers faced when fear and desperation eclipsed duty. While also giving an idea of why the soldiers found in these specific protocols attempted to escape. This is done so that the analysis is also built on information coming from the used protocols and not only relying on already existing knowledge. These records give valuable firsthand stories and show how ideas of guilt, loyalty, and responsibility were shaped under pressure. They reveal both the choices individuals made and the systems that judged those choices. However, as Latour points out, social science research can't treat these cases as clear, objective facts. Instead, they are complex mixtures of personal testimony, real-life situations, and official interpretation.

Case 1: Ole Johansen

The first case to be investigated in this thesis is the case of Ole Johansen, a soldier whose escape was not carefully planned, yet who still managed to cross the border into Sweden and even enlist with the enemy. However, he did not stay gone forever, as he chose to return and face the consequences. On July 28, 1789, an interrogation began at Akershus Fortress in Norway, where Johansen, a common soldier, stood trial. The court documents reveal that Johansen had been only 18 years old when he was recruited into the Søndenfjeldske Geworbne Infantry Regiment in Fredrikstad. By the time his case was brought before the court, he was 24.[57]

During the late summer, Johansen had been granted leave to visit his parents until Christmas, with permission from General Major von Biellart. However, according to his own testimony, things took a drastic turn on his journey back to the Fredrikstad garrison. While passing through Oslo, he indulged in drinking and gambling, eventually losing all his money. By the following morning, his situation had worsened, as he had accumulated even more gambling debt and, in his desperation, was forced to hand over his military equipment as payment.[58] Johansen's actions are framed as the product of panic and misfortune, but that raises the question of who is acting here? The story presents alcohol, gambling, and debt as forces that overtook him, removing the blame from himself. Agency here is distributed not solely to Johansen, but also to his environment, the social temptations, and military expectations, which redirected his behavior. In Johansen's version of events, it is emphasized his bad luck, youthful recklessness, and panic, which conveniently casts Johansen as a victim of circumstance rather than a deserter. Such a narrative would have served him well in court, allowing him the chance to avoid the harsher charges of treason or deliberate defection.

Overcome with fear and panic, Johansen decided to flee to Sweden, where he was recruited into the Swedish army. His service with the Swedish forces was short-lived. The moment, according to his story, when he realized he was expected to fight against his homeland, he deserted once again. According to his own account, he could not bring himself

[57] Riksarkivet, Akershus festning auditøren, Justisprotokoll, 1785-1808

[58] Ibid

to turn his back on his country and fight on the wrong side. With this in mind, he made the decision to return to Norway and accept whatever punishment awaited him. That Johansen claimed not to know he would be an enemy to Denmark-Norway when he joined the Swedish military shows as gullible. This assertion seems more like a calculated move to reframe his second desertion as an act of patriotism rather than another opportunistic escape. The court ended up found Johansen guilty, sentenced him to run the gauntlet. However, his sentence was later reduced, and instead of physical punishment, he was only required to pay for the military equipment he had lost.[59] Johansen's story highlights that even if he lied about some of the details in this story to better himself, the fear of punishment could push a soldier to flee. As for others, desertion did not always out of fear of the punishment that awaited you, but in response to the punishment they were already enduring. For these individuals, escape was a final reaction to the conditions they were forced to endure. The brutal conditions of the penal system at places like Akershus Fortress did not merely deter crime, they often pushed individuals to a desperate escape. Johansen's case also shows how uncertain the analysis of these protocols can be. These court records don't capture simple truths, they show people trying to defend themselves under pressure. What they reveal is shaped by the interactions between individuals, institutions, objects, and the stories people tell.

Case 2: Bertel Olsen Grinderud

Yet not all deserters or escapees sought simply to rebuild their lives in peace. Some, like Bertel Olsen Grinerud, had long-standing entanglements with the justice system and responded to punishment with defiance rather than retreat. In the late autumn of 1792, Bertel Olsen Grinerud slipped away from the cold stone confines of Akershus fortress, where he had been sentenced to five years of hard labor in chains. Bertel was no stranger to punishment. He had already served time in the *Tugthus* for petty theft, only to be released and caught again this time for a more serious crime. The court had been swift. He was branded a *vanefuld og dristig Tyv* and sent to live out his sentence in irons, working under guard at the fortress.[60] Bertel's escape was

[59] Riksarkivet, Akershus festning auditøren, Justisprotokoll, 1785-1808

[60] Ibid

carefully planned. During a previous unauthorized journey to Sweden, he had hidden civilian clothes with a widow near Drøbak. He knew escape would not be easy. He also knew it was only a matter of time before he would try again. On October 5th, while working outside the fortress at a royal building under repair, he and fellow prisoner Halvor Bødker fled still wearing their chains. They walked through the forest toward Drøbak, about four Norwegian miles away, where they used stones to smash off their irons. They buried the chains and their prison uniforms, and Bertel retrieved his hidden clothes from the widow, who recognized him and returned the garments without resistance. From there, they crossed the fjord by stolen boat to Røyken parish and continued through Drammen, eventually reaching Kongsberg. Upon arriving in Kongsberg on October 8th, Bertel committed another theft, breaking into a property and stealing 90 rigsdaler. He was caught shortly afterward, while Halvor escaped. Most of the money was recovered, except for a small portion thought to be lost. Back at Agershus, the court was unsympathetic. The story was heard, the evidence read aloud, and the verdict was unanimous. Bertel Olsen Grinerud was to be whipped at the post, branded in the forehead, and condemned to a lifetime of chained labor.[61] Bertel Olsen Grinerud's escape was not simply an act of fleeing punishment, nor was it created out of panic or fear. Unlike other cases, such as Ole Johansen's, who, according to himself, deserted to avoid harsh discipline and consequences, Bertel's motives can you say are deeper. His escape was about gaining back the freedom that had been taken from him. His escape was a search for the life he once had or might still build. Bertel's careful planning, burying civilian clothes with a widow near Drøbak, knowing the landscape, and timing his escape with another prisoner shows that he had long imagined a return to a free life, not just the avoidance of more suffering. His actions weren't impulsive, they were the result of someone who saw freedom as the only alternative to a life spent in chains.

Bertel's gives us a view into how labels like thief or prisoner are not fixed, just like his identity as a soldier was not. Bertel's story also shows how identity, actions, and even objects are not as stable as they might seem. His escape, even though carefully planned, was shaped by many others around him. Without any of these factors Grinerud escape would not

[61] Riksarkivet, Akershus festning auditøren, Justisprotokoll, 1785-1808

have gone this far as it did. We see the fellow prisoner who fled with him, the widow who returned his clothes, the people he met along the way. Even objects like the chains, clothes, and stolen money played a role, by helping or hindering him at different points throughout his journey. What seems like a simple desertion becomes, on closer look, a messy, and unpredictable escape attempt.

Case 3: Henrich Christopher Erdmann

Trying to earn freedom that would be impossible to receive again, others deserted for far more personal reasons, driven not by freedom but by fear, uncertainty, or misplaced hope. which was the case of Henrich Christopher Erdmann, a 24-year-old soldier from Hannover, whose desertion stemmed from self-preservation. His story, even though quieter than Bertel's dramatic desertion attempt, nonetheless reveals the emotional weight carried by soldiers within the harsh structures of 18th-century military life. On January 7, 1789, a military court in Oslo heard the case of Henrich Christopher Erdmann, as he was accused of desertion. A veteran of the Hanoverian Infantry, Erdmann had only recently enlisted in the Danish-Norwegian Hussar Regiment under a six-year contract. Though he had taken the military oath, he had not yet completed communion, a rite often marking full integration into military life. In court, Erdmann confessed openly. He said he fled out of fear of punishment for a prior mistake, hoping to reach Germany and escape military jurisdiction. He emphasized that he had never been punished in other regiments, casting himself as motivated by anxiety rather than rebellion.[62] Erdmann did not desert alone. Hans Friderich Andersen, a 20-year-old recruit who had joined the Hussars only a month earlier, testified that he followed Erdmann after a conversation between them. He claimed no intent to desert, acting instead out of loyalty and impulsiveness.[63] The two were captured not by military patrols but by local peasants, who noted the soldiers' unloaded pistols, suggesting they posed no real threat. Both men confessed without resistance or excuse. The court sentenced them to pass through the gauntlet six times, receiving blows from 200 fellow soldiers, and required them to reaffirm their enlistment and

[62] Riksarkivet, Akershus festning auditøren, Justisprotokoll, 1785-1808
[63] Ibid

repay the cost of their capture, 14 rigsdaler each plus transport fees. Though the court acknowledged they had committed no further crimes, it was made clear that desertion, regardless of motive, would be met with harsh and public punishment. In Erdmann's case, the very fear he sought to escape led him directly to the suffering he had hoped to avoid.[64]

In Erdmann's case, the punishment he had hoped to escape led him directly to the suffering he tried to avoid. His story shows how desertion was often a personal reaction out of fear and uncertainty of what would happen to them. It also highlights how important the role of civilians could be in military matters. As Forrest points out, help from local populations was an important factor if you wanted a better chance of escaping. As is shown in this case, as it was not soldiers but local peasants who stopped Erdmann's escape, as the civilians noticed the men's pistols were unloaded, they then turned them in. The local peasants' involvement reminds us that military discipline was not only upheld by the army alone, but by a broader network of actors, including civilians. But at the same time, if we look at this case through a different lens, Erdmann's explanation that he fled out of fear of punishment might also be seen as a convenient cover story. His desire to return to Germany, something he mentioned during his trial, could suggest that his true motive was not running from punishment, but a wish to go home. It is becomes highly likely he saw an opportunity to leave the harsh and unfamiliar military life in Denmark behind. Through this lens, his confession looks more shaped to appear sympathetic, downplaying any intention to desert for good.

Patterns of Desertion: Individual Cases, Shared Conditions

Viewed individually, the cases of Johansen, Grinerud, and Erdmann may appear as different episodes formed by differing motives and factors. Yet look at it together, and a new pattern shows. These were not men just trying to evade duty or pursue a new life somewhere else. Their actions show the pressures within the military and the penal system of late 18th-century Denmark-Norway. Looking at Johansen's case, we can see desertion was driven as a response to expected punishment, where the dread of military discipline was stronger when harsher punishment was expected if recaptured. For others, like Grinerud, escape was not only about

[64] Riksarkivet, Akershus festning auditøren, Justisprotokoll, 1785-1808

avoiding suffering but about gaining freedom again after being degraded from soldier to penal laborer. His planned escape was an effort to have a chance at regaining his life lost to military control. Despite their differences, these men moved within a shared network, one defined by discipline, public humiliation, with no clear paths to freedom. Their stories open a new window into the landscape of life under a regime that is governed through surveillance and physical punishment. What these cases reveal is that desertion was not always a crime of disloyalty. More often, it was an attempt to escape a system that allowed little space for error.

Desertion as a Structured Response

When we begin to examine these cases as more than some short stories from a time long ago, a pattern emerges from the desertion, that it was not merely the result of poor morale or inadequate training, or not just the harsh conditions or low wages, it was a rational response to a punitive system that governed through fear. For many soldiers, the strict discipline, severe consequences for even minor infractions, and the ever-present threat of brutal penalties created an environment where desertion seemed like the only escape, especially if you had already committed an offense. This fear was ingrained in the minds of the soldiers. The looming chance of harsh military justice drove many soldiers to take desperate actions in search of some kind of freedom. Heinsen's work gives a view into how the military penal system works, though designed to enforce discipline without permanently branding soldiers with dishonor, sometimes produced the opposite effects, as happened with the cases he worked with. While punishments were meant to be logical and allow for reintegration, their harsh physical nature created an atmosphere of fear. The system relied on carefully using violence to uphold orders, but by doing so, it instead created such dread that soldiers often fled the chance of punishment. Drawing on Guy Geltner's work, Heinsen shows that military punishment worked not only as a correction but as a form of communication, it was a means of reinforcing moral and social norms.[65] Yet this communicative violence was in some ways unstable. The very rituals intended to build unity in some cases led to desertion. Soldiers, punished harshly for

[65] Johan Heinsen. "Mercenary Punishment: Penal Logics in the Military Labour Market": Violent Communication

even small mistakes, saw running away as a sensible way to escape a system that caused pain but didn't destroy their honor.

This strong fear, as described above, was not simply a byproduct of military rule, it was a feature of a disciplinary regime. If we are to understand the mechanisms that produce such intense emotional responses, we must look more closely at the practices in which power was enacted. The violence was not random but ritualized, designed to mold soldiers' behavior through suffering. This fear was not incidental, it was deliberately created, even if it did not always have the outcome that was desired. Military punishments in eighteenth-century Denmark were crafted not merely to penalize individual misdeeds but to communicate broader messages about power, obedience, and the fragility of belonging. All the harsh punishments used in the military during this time all served a dual purpose to inflict pain and to remind. The body, being marked and beaten, became a symbol and a warning to others. Through this, military authorities managed not only to punish but to mold the soldiers. Soldiers lived under this constant language of violence, where discipline was as much about making an example as it was about correcting them.

While these disciplinary practices functioned as a form of communication aimed at maintaining order, their emotional and psychological consequences were far-reaching and often counterproductive, as mentioned before. The gap between intended control and response becomes evident when we examine the lived experiences of those subjected to this system. The three cases offered insight into how the logic of punishment, fear, and control manifested in decisions to desert, revealing the profound disjunction between institutional intention and individual survival. While there were many reasons for desertion, one of the core reasons this thesis sees was the fear of punishment and the realities of the system they lived in. A common tendency seen in their stories is the consequences that awaited them, often more horrifying than the risks of deserting, pushing many to take action. Soldiers like Ole Johansen and Henrich Christopher Erdmann, even though their future may have only involved punishment rather than penal labor, which would have allowed them to eventually heal and return to normal life, they still chose to run. This demonstrates the profound fear that the brutal threat of violence instilled in the soldiers. Even those with little to lose from running, as in their cases, saw desertion as their only option, reflecting just how deeply the penal system instilled

fear. Looking at Bertel Olsen Grinerud's desertion emerges not simply as a reaction to fear, but as a determined pursuit of freedom. His escape from Akershus fortress was carefully planned, with the knowledge that his sentence to hard labor had stripped him of all personal freedom. Once a soldier, he had been reduced to servitude, working with no hope of release. Desertion, in this context, was not about avoiding pain but about reclaiming the life he had lost. Grinerud's decision to retrieve hidden civilian clothes and cross the fjord to begin a new life creates a vision above survival, it was about rebuilding a new self that was denied by the state. The threat of violence was there, but it was the denial of freedom and choice that made escape the only real option. His story shows that desertion could be an act of self-liberation, not just desperation. The key takeaway from these cases is that desertion was not only a reaction to punishment, but also a run for freedom. The combination of punishment, forced labor, and control created a system where staying meant the loss of identity. Soldiers in the Danish-Norwegian army deserted because of a rational response to a system that offered no path. Many enlisted with hopes, only to find themselves bound by long contracts, low pay, brutal discipline, and harsh living conditions. Within this system, desertion became the only true escape.

Billardage

Something we can take from the why in answering the question of this text is that soldiers not only deserted out of fear, desperation, or freedom, but also to renegotiate better terms by reenlisting in another regiment of the same army practice widespread in 18th-century Europe, as referred to in the outline. During the time of the Austrian War of Succession, this tactic was known as *billardage*, with repeat deserters called *rouleurs*.[66] This cyclical desertion pattern also appeared in Denmark as presented through Heisen's *Ind og ud af slaverierne*, where some soldiers deserted repeatedly, re-enlisted after fleeing, and formed a kind of loop. This was possible due to poorly coordinated recruitment systems, even though doing so without papers was risky. Some falsified or bought passes, while others were recruited directly from prison.[67] Such actions reflect broader patterns of resistance to coercive labor structures, particularly those classified by the International Institute of Social History as tributary labor relations involving soldiers, serfs, and convicts.[68] Danish deserters formed a significant subset of convicts, and punishments varied based on repetition or whether the desertion involved stolen equipment, which could elevate the crime to theft. Many also committed additional offenses while on the run, something we can also see from data from Akershus, that 72.62% of all cases are theft or desertion.[69] The army was punished harshly, as we know, but Heinsen also gives new information with about 63.2% received life sentences. While also saying that the motivation for work among such convicts was often driven less by duty than by the threat of physical punishment.[70] Something that correlates with stories of the soldiers from Akershus and their journey in the penal system. But through Leo Lucassen and Lex Heerma van Voss introduction chapter in *A Global History of Runaways,* we can see this is not something unique to Denmark as this trend mirrors historical precedents across Eurasia, where escape from labor was often the only viable route to autonomy. From medieval peasants fleeing corvée to Russian serfs settling in Siberia, desertion was a common form of resistance.[71]

[66] Bradley L Craig. A Global History of Runaways: Workers, Mobility, and Capitalism. p. 8-9
[67] Johan Heisen. Ind og ud af slaverierne. p. 24-25
[68] Bradley L Craig. A Global History of Runaways: Workers, Mobility, and Capitalism. p. 9
[69] Attachment 1 Akerhus
[70] Johan Heisen. Ind og ud af slaverierne. p. 24-25
[71] Bradley L Craig. A Global History of Runaways: Workers, Mobility, and Capitalism. p. 9

In some cases, desertion was not just a one-time act of defiance or survival, but part of a recurring cycle. For example, some German mercenaries, once safely back in Germany, sought to enlist in new military units in exchange for fresh *Handgeld* signing bonuses, as mentioned in the outline. This practice turned desertion into a kind of opportunistic livelihood, where the risk of capture was weighed against the potential reward of what might be called easy money from recruiters. In this way, desertion was not just an escape but a calculated career choice for some. A similar logic, as we can see with cases shown now and later, is also applied to desertions to Sweden, especially in the case of soldiers seeking to evade punishment. One illustrative example is that of Ole Johansen, who claimed that he fled primarily to avoid the consequences of disciplinary action. However, his actions also followed a recognizable pattern observed in the 18th century, a trend where deserting to receive *Handgeld* signing bonuses became a common and somewhat predictable route among soldiers in similar situations.

Case 5: Ole Johansen

To start this off, we will revisit Ole Johansen, the 24-year-old recruit, who lost his possessions while gambling. According to himself, Afraid of punishment and ashamed. he survived for several months by taking irregular work, drifting between employers. However, when local Swedish authorities began conscripting foreigners into military service, Johansen again sought escape. This time, he returned voluntarily to Norway, reporting himself at Kongsvinger, where he received a travel pass to Fredrikshald. Instead of following that route, he once more diverted, this time toward Oslo, where he encountered members of the Husar Corps. Hoping to avoid consequences for his desertion, he concealed his past and allowed himself to be recruited again, presenting himself as a local landless laborer. When questioned about his false enlistment, Johansen admitted to understanding that serving in two regiments was forbidden, but claimed he hoped that by joining a unit soon to be deployed, he might avoid punishment.[72]

Johansen's escape was not a single act of planned desertion, but a series of opportunistic choices shaped by fear. These qualities make him an interesting case, as he does not represent

[72] Riksarkivet, Akershus festning auditøren, Justisprotokoll, 1785-1808

the stereotypical deserter who spends a large amount of time planning his escape with foresight and knowledge of the terrain. Instead, Johansen illustrates a more impulsive form of desertion. By tracing his unplanned route from Fredriksværn to Oslo, to across the border into Sweden, and eventually back to Norway, his experience illustrates how deserters navigated both physical and social landscapes through his desertion. So, while he does not represent the typical deserter who carefully plans his escape, he also makes the reader ask the question is he a man down on this luck trying to save himself from the harsh and violent penal system as he claims or rather is he an opportunist who relies on split-second decisions in an attempt to secure the best possible outcome for himself.

Case 6: Severin Johann Ross

But as said, Ole Johansen way of going to Sweden was not unique, as Severin Johann Ross, then a member of the Copenhagen garrison, deserted his post approximately seven years before his trial in 1787. His desertion was not done alone but was carried out in complicity with two others, suggesting at least some level of planning and there being a collective intent. From Copenhagen, Ross fled to Sweden, one of the common destinations for deserters due to its relative distance and safety from Danish military authorities. Once in Sweden, Ross did not merely disappear, as Johansen had, he entered military service there. He remained in Swedish service for several years, a choice that demonstrates his intention to integrate into a new military context rather than live as a fugitive. However, in the winter preceding his trial, Ross reportedly found an opportunity to escape Swedish service, but it is clear he seized a moment of mobility or vulnerability within that system. His next choice was important, rather than continuing to flee or hide, he voluntarily returned to Norway and presented himself to the authorities, expressing remorse for his earlier desertion. Despite his return, Ross's sale of his military uniform and equipment before desertion still increased his offense in the eyes of the military court, as it implied both a symbolic and material severance from his duty. He ended up punished with running the gauntlet and required to reenter service and repay the value of his lost gear.[73]

[73] Riksarkivet, Akershus festning auditøren, Justisprotokoll, 1785-1808

The cases of Ole Johansen and Severin Johann Ross offer two contrasting yet linked narratives that are linked when it comes to desertions from the late 18th-century Danish-Norwegian army. Both men crossed the border into Sweden, and something we can see through the deserters a common destination for military deserters due to its perceived safety from the Danish state.

However, the nature of their decisions, the way they escaped, and the reasons they eventually came back show clear differences that reflect broader patterns of desertion in early modern military settings. From the outside, both cases might seem like efforts to find a better, more peaceful life away from the hardships and strict rules of military service. Desertion, in this context, was not just a crime or cowardice from the soldiers, but often a personal decision formed by economic hardship and the hope for self-preservation. However, the romanticized idea of peace and a better life across the border often proved imaginary. Their returns, however, were not acts of surrender so much as calculated decisions. Facing an uncertain future in Sweden and unwilling to risk their lives in another nation's conflicts, they opted instead to re-enter the Danish-Norwegian system despite the potential consequences. Of course, if we are to believe the soldiers that it was their patriotism that made them come back, something that may be hard to believe. Something that is believable is that they did not want to fight a war, and more so for a foreign nation, this applies more to Ross' case and his story. Lastly, we also come back to the concept of the signing on money you would get from joining an army, something that is highly likely thought about for both the soldiers, as it was a means to get fast and easy money. For men like Ole Johansen and Severin Johann Ross, these payments offered more than an incentive they provided a means of survival. The promise of cash upon enlistment could temporarily solve the most urgent material needs, such as food, lodging, clothing, or simply a way out of desperation.

Chapter 3: The way to how

Geography as an actor

Now that we have discussed some of the reasons why soldiers chose to desert from the army, this section will shift focus to examine *how* desertion occurred. What choices did soldiers make when deciding to flee? What thoughts, motivations, and networks guided them? Were there common patterns in how soldiers deserted, or were these actions shaped by individual circumstances? As previously mentioned, deserting the army was no simple task. A successful escape attempt typically required a high degree of planning, familiarity with the terrain, and a substantial amount of luck. The army had put numerous obstacles in place precisely to prevent desertion, making any such attempt both risky and logistically complex. In order to explore the different escape routes and methods used by deserters, this analysis will focus on individual case studies. The deserters selected for closer examination are those who provided relatively detailed accounts of their escape routes, and have given a more detailed explanation of how they did it. In selecting these cases, an effort has also been made to include examples from various regions within the Danish-Norwegian Kingdom, thereby providing a larger geographical representation. Furthermore, attention will be given to the destinations of these escapees. A noticeable pattern emerges in the frequency with which certain destinations recur, most notably Sweden and Germany.[74] This is not coincidental. As there could be a bias in escape routes toward neighboring countries, they represented the closest and most accessible points of refuge. For German-born soldiers, there could also be an added motivation, a desire to return home. This is why this section aims to uncover the reason behind military desertion, showing how these actions were performed with an interplay of geography, personal motivations, and broader social and military trends. By analyzing the routes taken by the deserters themselves, we can better understand desertion not just as a breach of duty, but as a human response to the hardships and limitations of military life.

Building on this foundation, we now turn to an often-overlooked factor in then it comes to desertion and that is the role of the physical environment itself. If we are to understand how desertion unfolded in practice, we must not only ask why soldiers fled and

[74] Attachment 2 dataset

where they went but also consider through what geography they attempted their escape. This opens the door to applying geographical theory. Could geography itself function as a kind of actor in the story of desertion? Could it shape or influence the decisions, routes, and success rates of deserting soldiers? How does water behave, and what impact does it have on soldiers trying to flee? How do the mountains of Norway, the fields of Denmark, the forest, and the roads affect movement, exposure, and concealment? By seeing geography not just as background, but as an actor in historical events, it may uncover new methodological approaches to geography as a methodological tool, even a methodological actor that offers fresh insights into the dynamics of desertion on Danish ground.

This leads over to the next part of this analyze of the deserters from Danish-Norwegian army there the analysis will now go back and reintroduce while drawing extensively on the theoretical and empirical contributions of Ennio E. Piano and Louis Rouanet *Desertion as theft*, alongside Alan Forrest's *Conscripts and Deserters: The Army and French Society during the Revolution and Empire*, to build a understanding of desertion patterns through their work on the Napoleonic era. Both perspectives emphasize the pivotal role of geography in shaping soldiers' decisions to flee military service, though they also highlight complementary social and institutional dimensions. This will be the main theory to support ANT in this part of the analysis.

Piano and Rouanet's framework provides a foundation for examining how the natural landscapes influenced desertion. Their research reveals that desertion in Napoleonic France was uneven and concentrated primarily in rural and geographically challenging regions such as the Massif Central, the Pyrenees, the Alps, and the heavily forested areas of Brittany and Normandy. These environments offered natural protection that weakened the military's ability to track deserters. Flat and urbanized areas like Paris and the eastern plains, by contrast, these regions showed lower desertion rates due to stronger administrative presence and easier surveillance.[75] Piano and Rouanet's quantitative econometric analysis underlines this spatial pattern, a ten-percentage-point increase in the share of territory above 500 meters in altitude correlates with a 1.8 to 2.2 percentage point rise in desertion rates, while departments

[75] Piano, Ennio E., and Louis Rouanet. "Desertion as Theft." p. 9

classified as mountainous show even more pronounced increases of 8.7 to 11.9 points.[76] Coastal regions similarly strengthened desertion through coves, cliffs, and caves that offered escape routes or hiding places. These findings align with evidence indicating that state enforcement was most challenged where natural terrain favored deserters.[77] Their study also brings attention to the changes of the seasons, noting that desertion peaked during summer and autumn, particularly harvest time, when the opportunity cost of military service rose alongside demand for rural labor. The grain fields provided additional concealment for runaways, creating natural shields against patrols.[78] In response to these geographic obstacles, Piano and Rouanet highlight how the French state implemented punitive policies aimed at reducing the deserters' potential gains. Captured soldiers were often sent to remote colonies, islands, or ships, environments where escape was more difficult and outside options were limited.[79]

Alan Forrest's work complements but also extends this geographical theory by adding a social dimension. While he agrees that geography shaped desertion patterns, identifying regions like the Massif Central and parts of the West and Southwest as hotspots due to forests, mountains, and remote terrain, he emphasizes that geography alone cannot explain the persistence of military resistance. Forrest points to the role of local communities, which often helped the deserters and gave them shelter, assistance, or approval to deserters, making desertion a socially embedded practice rather than a purely individual calculation.[80] According to Forrest, many deserters were local youths whose opposition to conscription reflected broader communal attitudes and solidarities against the state. This collective resistance turned military evasion into a form of community-based opposition, intertwining environmental opportunities with social norms. Thus, desertion was strongest not only because of the terrain's features but also due to the social contexts in which these deserters operated.[81]

[76] Piano, Ennio E., and Louis Rouanet. "Desertion as Theft." p. 10
[77] Ibid. p. 11
[78] Ibid. p. 12
[79] Ibid. p. 12-13
[80] Forrest, Alan I. *Conscripts and Deserters : The Army and French Society during the Revolution and Empire*. p. 71
[81] Ibid. *p. 72-73*

Together, these perspectives suggest that the interaction between geography and social context was critical in shaping desertion during the Napoleonic era. The French state's difficulties in conscription enforcement were compounded by both natural barriers and the social environment, which could hinder military control. While Piano and Rouanet's research provides a data-driven foundation emphasizing environmental constraints and institutional responses, Forrest strengthens the analysis by highlighting the importance of communal support networks. This dual approach reveals desertion as a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by intertwined physical and social forces. Finally, this framework can also go beyond France. In studying soldiers in the Danish-Norwegian army, for instance, the same mechanisms, with challenging terrain, mountains in Norway, and water in Denmark, and local attitudes that could help the runaways, may explain a similar pattern of desertion. Such parallels underscore that the dynamics between nature, state authority, and community resistance are not confined to one national case but represent a more general feature of late 18th and early 19th-century conscript militaries.

Geography of Denmark and Norway

While much of the scholarly ink has been spilled on French conscripts vanishing into the foggy folds of the Massif Central, the fundamental dynamics of desertion are far from unique to French forces. Applying a geographically grounded framework to the Danish-Norwegian setting offers valuable insights into how soldiers in the north similarly engaged in acts of evasion, shaped by the features of their environment. By 1800, Norway's landscape had been shaped by 5,000-6,000 years of human land use, primarily through farming and grazing. Agricultural activity varied across regions, initiating forest clearance in some places while leaving others more wooded. This resulted in a patchwork landscape, with reduced tree cover in lowland and coastal areas, but significant woodland remaining in remote and less fertile regions. Many areas retained open land and woodland, shaped by traditional land-use practices rather than industrial transformation.[82] If we first look at the landscape surrounding

[82] Bryn, Anders, and Lars Østbye Hemsing. "Impacts of Land Use on the Vegetation in Three Rural Landscapes of Norway."

Oslo, for instance, it presents notable natural advantages for those seeking to avoid military service. Characterized by a complex geography of forested islands, green hills, and a fjord-lined coast, the region provided opportunities for concealment and evasion. The varied terrain offered strategic possibilities for escape, particularly for those with local knowledge. The nature around Oslo is a striking blend of coastal and inland environments. At the northern end of the Oslofjord, the landscape opens into calm, sheltered waters dotted with around 40 islands, both large and small. These islands, some rocky, others forested, offered a mix of sandy coves, cliffs, and quiet inlets.[83] They could obscure movements from military patrols and provide refuge. Inland areas, with their cover of birch and spruce forests, reflected the historical pattern of regionally varied land use. Though shaped by centuries of farming and these forests still offered some concealment. While the French state employed punitive measures such as penal colonies or naval exile to deter desertion, in the northern territories, the environment itself, marked by long winters, cold winds, and physical isolation, played a role in forming the risks and realities of desertion. In this way, Norway's mix of woodland and open spaces gives a wilderness untouched by humans, but rather a landscape deeply transformed over time, yet still capable of evading surveillance or control. The natural environment surrounding Oslo, defined by a patchwork of forests, cultivated lands, low mountains, and a fragmented coastal landscape with dozens of islands, offers an example of how geography shapes both state authority and deserters' paths. While not directly linked to Napoleonic military structures, Oslo's terrain has some of the same geographically challenging regions identified by Ennio E. Piano and Louis Rouanet in their study of French desertion. The terrain near Oslo, though long inhabited and used, still echoed some of the features of the Massif Central, the Pyrenees, and Brittany, which provided concealment and escape opportunities. Here too, the terrain functioned not as a neutral backdrop but as an active factor in patterns of desertion.

While the case of Norway provides a geographic parallel to the landscape of Napoleonic France, Denmark presents a contrasting terrain and a distinct set of conditions influencing desertion. Though Denmark had once been heavily forested, by 1800 its landscape

[83] https://www.oslo.com/v/geography/

had been altered by millennia of human land use. Unlike the rugged and partially wooded terrain of Norway, Denmark's landscape had become open and agricultural. Forests had been reduced to patches, and the most common landscape type was open farmland fields, pastures, and grasslands. What remained was a varied mosaic of cultivated land, heath, and fragmented woodlands, shaped by soil and historical patterns of use.[84] This difference in physical geography suggests that the ways of desertion in Denmark likely followed a different logic. In the absence of highland and inland forests, Denmark's long coastline, along with its internal waterways and marshlands, became a geographical enabler of desertion. These features created hard to monitor spaces and potential escape routes, especially for individuals familiar with maritime navigation. However, the possibilities of successful evasion were often constrained by other factors. Many deserters during the Denmark-Norway union were not native to Denmark; a significant proportion came from the German territories, such as Frankfurt. These recruits often lacked the intimate geographic knowledge, dialect fluency, and communal ties that native Norwegians or rural French conscripts could use to their advantage. Thus, while the Danish terrain may have offered opportunities, particularly along the coast, it was less conducive to sustained hiding inland due to its openness and the strong administrative reach of the Danish state.

In sum, the Danish case demonstrates that geography shaped desertion not only through the material presence of forests or waterways but also through its interaction with demographic and institutional variables. Where Norwegian and French deserters could exploit familiar, complex terrain shaped by both nature and tradition, many of Denmark's soldiers, especially non-natives, faced a flatter, more surveilled, and less forgiving environment. Here, the sea replaced the mountain as the primary medium of escape, but with limitations defined by experience, access, and luck.

[84] Odgaard, Bent Vad, and Peter Rasmussen. "Origin and Temporal Development of Macro-Scale Vegetation Patterns in the Cultural Landscape of Denmark."

Destination

Geography also comes into play when it comes to the destination. When analyzing the destinations chosen by deserters from the Danish-Norwegian army during the early modern period, one of the most salient patterns to emerge from the data is the high number of individuals who either fled to Sweden or remained in the country where their garrison was located.[85] The most frequently chosen international destination among those who did flee abroad was Sweden. This is not surprising when one considers both the geographical and social factors at play. In contrast, Germany, which might have seemed an equally logical destination due to its size, fragmented political landscape, and historical military connections with Denmark-Norway, appears only rarely in the data: just three individuals in the dataset fled in that direction.[86] This uneven distribution of escape destinations can be explained through a combination of geographic accessibility, the strength of local social networks, and the circumstances under which deserters made their decisions. Many of the garrisons included in the study, particularly those in Copenhagen, Oslo, Fyn, and Akershus, are relatively close to the Swedish border. For soldiers stationed in these areas, Sweden presented a clear option for escape, both in terms of proximity and perceived safety. Border regions historically tend to facilitate movement, especially when official state control is limited or porous. Moreover, Sweden was politically independent from Denmark-Norway and often in conflict or competition with it, further making it an appealing refuge for military deserters. However, the most interesting trend in the data is not the number of individuals who fled abroad, but rather the proportion of deserters who chose not to leave the territory of their garrison at all. In Denmark, 64.71%, compared to Norway's 57.14%, of deserters in the dataset remained within the country after deserting, a remarkably high figure.[87] Forrest's theory of community helps illuminate these decisions. According to Forrest's research, we can see that individuals embedded in strong social networks are more likely to seek help within those networks. The deserters may have chosen to remain within their communities because these networks provided both emotional support and material assistance, such as food, shelter, or protection, rather than taking a long journey alone with only nature as a companion. In some cases, this

[85] Attachment 2 dataset
[86] Attachment 2 dataset
[87] Attachment 2 dataset

also explains why deserters did not return to their place of birth or origin, particularly if strong social ties had already been established in or near the garrison location.

Interestingly, while some deserters who fled to Sweden were successful in remaining free for extended periods, others were captured upon reentry into Denmark-Norway, suggesting that cross-border escape was not always a permanent solution. This was particularly evident among cases from the Akershus garrison, where several individuals managed to cross into Sweden, only to be apprehended when they later attempted to return.[88] On the other hand, staying in place was not always the safest option. As the data is drawn from court records, it only includes deserters who were caught. This introduces a crucial bias, those who remained in Denmark or Norway may have been easier to apprehend, either because they were geographically closer to military authorities or because their movements were more easily tracked by local informants. In contrast, those who successfully reached and remained in Sweden or beyond are, by definition, absent from the judicial archives and thus invisible in this study. The dataset does not allow us to compare success rates between those who stayed and those who fled internationally, it only reflects those who got caught. Therefore, while it may appear that many deserters chose to remain locally, this may also be the group most vulnerable to recapture. Moreover, several of the cases in which deserters stayed in Denmark or Norway show evidence of poorly planned or impulsive escape attempts.[89] This reflects a dimension of desertion, where desertion was rarely a well-planned act. Instead, desertion often seems to have been a decision made under the spur of the moment or dissatisfaction with service conditions. As a result, many deserters lacked a coherent escape plan or long-term strategy. Their choices were typically reactive, shaped by whatever seemed available or familiar. This is evident in testimonies where deserters describe simply walking away from their post or seeking refuge in the home of someone they knew, rather than attempting a more distant escape. Such behavior made them particularly vulnerable to recapture, especially when they remained in known areas without taking steps to conceal their identity. This behavior stands in contrast to the cases where more strategic efforts were made to cross borders or establish new identities,

[88] Attachment 2 dataset
[89] Attachment 2 dataset

though even these were not always successful. An example of one of these well-planned unsuccessful escapes can be seen in one of Nüblings escape attempts.

Chapter 4: How - Networks in Motion

Case 7: Theodor Ulrich Nubling

In 1788, near the end of his service, Nübling became involved in a desertion plot with two sergeants and a corporal. Hoping for a better future in Russia, they scouted the coast for a boat and attempted an escape during the harvest, but a storm forced them back.[90] Sometime later, a better opportunity arises.[91] dressed as a sailor, he sneaked into the guarded naval district of Nyboder, stole two oars, and navigated the city in darkness, dodging guards and hiding in shadows. Injured and exhausted, he finally reached the meeting point and rejoined his companions.[92] Later that night, the group, now eleven strong, including a woman and two children, boarded a small patrol boat. Armed with pistols and sabers, they set off, but the boat began sinking within minutes. As panic rose, Nübling, the only swimmer, tied a rope to himself and swam toward the shallows, towing the boat for 15 minutes before collapsing on shore. A companion took over, and the others eventually reached land, later finding Nübling unconscious. Revived with spirits and water, he was stunned by the ordeal. Fearing capture, they hid, posted naked guards with sabers, and at dawn, reentered the city. Their belongings, hidden in Dyrehaven, were later retrieved by the sergeant's wife. [93] Back in the city, Nübling now had three challenges. His money was soaked, which made payments difficult, but he managed by claiming that this wallet fell into water. His swollen, injured hands were hidden with gloves, leading others to suspect scabies. To avoid training, he faked a sprain to fool officers.[94] Plagued by guilt and anxiety, he carried out his duties disinterestedly. He even tried to get assigned to a ship, hoping for a new start or an end to his life, but the request was denied in the end.[95]

[90] Karsten Skjold Petersen, "Otte år i Danmark" p. 107
[91] Ibid. p. 111
[92] Ibid. p. 112-113
[93] Ibid. p. 116
[94] Ibid. p. 117
[95] Ibid. p. 117-118

The Nübling desertion attempt of 1788 offers an interesting case study of how geography and material networks created both the possibilities and limited desertion in the Danish-Norwegian army. Even if the attempt was unsuccessful, it reveals how Denmark's flat, maritime landscape, unlike the mountainous terrains of Napoleonic France or Norway, was both a pathway and an obstacle to fight. Rather than relying on the open fields and patches of trees, Nübling and his group depended on mastering the coastlines and sea routes. Their plan to flee through Sweden to Russia hinged entirely on maritime mobility. As Ennio E. Piano and Louis Rouanet suggest, geography was not a passive backdrop but an active agent, the sea offered promise, but storms and faulty boats turned it into a trap. A sudden storm ruined their first attempt, and a leaking vessel nearly drowned the second. Geography, in this light, was an unreliable shifting actor, not just a setting. Actor-Network Theory sharpens this view. Nübling's escape wasn't just a personal decision, it was a fragile network of human and non-human actors deserters, civilians, boats, oars, uniforms, camphor, weather. Each had agency. The sea delayed them, his injuries weakened them, and even his swimming ability proved insufficient. The plan failed not from a single error, but from cascading breakdowns in a precarious system.

Alan Forrest reminds us that desertion was rarely a solo act. Nübling's group included eleven men, a woman, and two children working together with stolen weapons and coordinated plans. Like the local networks Forrest describes in France, they relied on informal support. But unlike the rural havens of Forrest's deserters, Nübling operated in an urban, militarized zone, where secrecy and complicity were harder to maintain, yet essential. Post-failure, Nübling's return to the city deepened his entanglement in this unstable network. Back at the garrison, he faked injuries, avoided drills while he lived in constant fear of being exposed. Despite his awareness and community help, his fate was shaped by chance and geography, something he could not control. His denied request for a ship assignment, perhaps a new way out, strengthened his confinement within the military he tried to flee. Ultimately, desertion was not merely about courage or intent. It was a product of shifting alignments between bodies, tools, terrain, and weather. ANT reframes Nübling's story as a collapse of a fragile system, not a failure of nerve. The Danish Sea, something so central to the plan's success, became an adversary that doomed the desertion attempt. Nübling's experience shows how geography

could inspire hope, but it could also punish. While it did offer a watery landscape where escape was possible, it just as easily could take hope away.

Case 8: Peter Mogensen

But Nübling was not the only soldier who sought escape by sea. Peter Mogensen from the *Livgarden til Hest* regiment had also grown tired of military life. *From the case documents, it appears that on January 22, Peter Mogensen left his service without valid reason with the intention of deserting to Jutland. In Kalundborg, he attempted to take a smuggler's boat to Jutland, but was arrested when his passport, which he had forged himself, was revealed as clearly false. He had sold his fur coat to a civilian and destroyed his uniform and boots, which were therefore no longer usable. This, along with the costs of his arrest, provisioning, and transport, was calculated at 26 rigsdaler and 48 skilling*.[96] He was arrested on the spot, before he could step onto the boat. Instead of freedom, Peter was marched back in chains, his failed escape sealing his fate.[97] In Peter Mogensen's attempted escape, the location of *Kalundborg* and its position function as a non-human actor as it offers a natural gateway to maritime routes, making it a logical node in Mogensen's actor-network of desertion. If Mogensen had gotten on the boat, he would have made a large rift between himself and the regiment, taking a step closer to the freedom he desired. However, this same geography also funnels movement through narrow, observable channels: harbor checkpoints, coastal patrols, and known routes, all of which invite surveillance and control. His escape was not purely individual but emerged from a fragile alignment of actors: uniforms, geography, forged documents, harbor authorities, and maritime routes came to form a network that led to his capture, as the network of control constructed by state influence affected his chances of success. Just like the boat that remains inert without successful alignment of other actors, geography here is a neutral partner, the same as we can see in the Nublings case, it is both a potential path to freedom and a terrain of risk. Mogensen's fate was shaped by interactions among the people, the failed passport, and the geography.

[96] Generalauditøren, Auditøren ved Den Kongelige Livgarde til Hest: F. Justitsprotokoller (1744 - 1866)
[97] Ibid

Case 9: Halvor Anderssen

When it came to deserting by boat, there were some who had better luck getting onboard the boat. On October 5, 1791, Halvor Anderssen escaped from Akershus Fortress. A former sailor and soldier, he had been sentenced to five years of slavery for theft. While working outside the prison, he and another prisoner, Bertel Olsen, fled into the countryside. *That night, they hid in a barn at Bestum, about one and a half fjerdingveje from town. They also hid in Pastor Sverdrup's garden, entering by climbing over the fence. They stayed there until dusk. They then removed their iron shackles and changed out of their slave clothes in a forest south of Sundvigen in Asker parish, using a small tool a kalmejser brought by Bertel. Halvor left the irons and clothes hidden and claimed they could still be found. Later, Bertel disappeared, leaving behind his clothes. Halvor took Bertel's gray trousers and wore them over his own red ones. He kept both of their slave jackets. The two reunited briefly at Sundvigen and again at Bragernes, after which Halvor continued alone. He traveled to Svelvik, where he boarded an English ship anchored near Rødtangen. The ship took him to Sunderland, England, and from there to Fredrikshald, where he left the ship and journeyed to Lier, where he was eventually apprehended.*[98] His escape had been bold, guided by geography and his former seafaring skills. Anderssen made his escape possible by knowing the network around him and by knowing the land around him. His success relied not on chance but on a familiarity with the terrain, which allowed him to create a route to freedom. The barn at Bestum, the priest's garden in Asker, the forests near Sundvigen, and the coastal access to Svelvik each functioned as tactical spaces acting as allies for Anderssen by concealing movement and offering rest. The boat and sailors in *Rødtangen* also become huge allies in Anderssen's desertion, offering him a gateway to a different legal and national space, outside the reach of Norwegian authorities. It puts Anderssen into a new network free from his former life as a soldier to slave, letting him transition back to sailor as he was before coming to Akerhus. Now, as a sailor on a British ship, Anderssen is providing a fluid and borderless space that enables his escape and freedom by the sea.

[98] Riksarkivet, Akershus festning auditøren, Justisprotokoll, 1785-1808

Case 10: Peter Christopher Bruns

On the night between the 9th and 10th of June 1789, Peter Christopher Bruns, a hussar stationed in the garrison at Oslo, absconded from his military post, a few days after he had sold some of his equipment. His escape took place under the cover of darkness, a calculated use of the night's concealment to avoid being detected. Bruns' escape did not appear to have a clear plan or destination. According to his later testimony, he claimed to have been in a state of illness or mental confusion, suggesting that his departure was impulsive rather than premeditated. Something undermined by a lieutenant: *although Hussar Peter C. Bruns had been reported as slightly unwell, there had been no signs of frenzy or mental disorder, which would have led the squadron to take precautions for his person, as is customary in such cases. Therefore, his claim was considered untrue and further undermined by the fact that he had, a few days prior, committed the offense of selling two entrusted pairs of trousers.*[99] Nevertheless, the route he chose indicates an attempt to avoid the main roads and remain out of sight, heading out along one of the roads leading into the surrounding countryside. But his escape was quickly stopped in the morning. Two local farmers encountered him in the early hours, figured out that he was a deserter, and took him into custody. He was subsequently returned to the authorities in Oslo within hours of his initial departure.[100] Bruns's reliance on the night and on the natural landscape to facilitate desertion failed him. It shows the limitations of being unprepared with no help or support. But if we go back and look at how Bruns used the night, we can see how the night itself became a non-human actor in his escape. It was not the setting of his escape, but an element he attempted to utilize and use its concealment as a means of protection. it temporarily equalized power by concealing his movements from the surveillance of the garrison and the community around it. Together with the darkness, Bruns tried to utilize the side roads away from the main roads and the rural space in hopes they would grant him invisibility. When this darkness Bruns had used was gone, his escape route brought him into contact with two farmers, human actors embedded within a social geography in cooperation

[99] Riksarkivet, Akershus festning auditøren, Justisprotokoll, 1785-1808
[100] Ibid

with the garrison's authority. In this way, the countryside acted not as an empty or neutral space, but as an active part of the network that ultimately undid his plans. The rural environment may have seemed like a refuge, but it contained its own surveillance networks, a network that did not sympathize with the deserter. Peter Christopher Bruns' failed desertion aligns with Forrest's view that successful desertion depended on social support and a helpful local community. While many deserters could evade capture through local assistance, Bruns lacked the ties to the rural area he fled. Instead of helping him, he was reported by local farmers, showing the absence of the social networks Forrest deems essential.

Case 11: Mads Jensen

On October 3, 1799, during preparations for a military maneuver, Mads Jensen, a 24-year-old conscript from Jutland, was found to be absent without leave. According to the initial inquiry, Jensen claimed that he lacked a complete uniform, specifically his regulation boots, which he stated had not arrived with the supply shipment. As a result, he left his post and traveled to the countryside. Mads Jensen maintained that he had not intended to desert. He asserted that had he truly wished to flee, he could have escaped to Sweden, a possibility he had briefly considered. He even admitted to approaching a Swedish sailor for passage, but ultimately decided against leaving. Jensen explained that his failure to report was due to confusion and a lack of knowledge about the proper procedures. Eventually, a man named Schneider encountered Jensen in the village of Brunsager. Recognizing the soldier as absent without permission, Schneider arrested him and returned him to military custody.[101] Mads Jensen's absence without leave can be interpreted as the outcome of a disrupted and unstable network of human and non-human actors. Jensen claimed that he lacked a complete uniform, his boots. This material absence played the central role in weakening his connection to the military structure. The boots were not merely clothing but functioned as symbolic and disciplinary tools. Without them, Jensen's position within the military order was compromised, Jensen's incomplete uniform cast doubt on his membership in that collective, or, according to Jensen's story, he tries to show that's the case. Multiple factors seem to have shaped his behavior, but

[101] Generalauditøren, Auditøren ved Den Kongelige Livgarde til Hest: F. Justitsprotokoller (1744 - 1866)

also conveniently displaced responsibility from himself. If we begin to believe Jensen's confusion about proper procedures as truth, it also reveals the role of non-human actors such as military rules and bureaucratic systems, which failed to provide clear guidance. The countryside allowed Jensen to move freely, providing concealment and space for deliberation. Brunsager, the village where he was found, became a site where the network reasserted control through the actions of Schneider, who recognized and detained him. Sweden played a symbolic role in the network. Though Jensen did not flee there, he considered it seriously. Sweden was close enough to tempt but distant enough to refuse. Jensen's actions emerged not from simple desertion but from an interplay of broken supply chains, unclear institutional procedures, human decisions, and a little geographic influence.

Case 12: Guldbrand Pedersen

In January 1790, a military court in Oslo heard the case of Gulbrand Pedersen, a 29-year-old under-constable who had deserted a year earlier but returned voluntarily. When he came, he was sent for questioning:

When did he desert? Around New Year, one year ago.

From where did he leave, which route did he take, where has he been, and how did he support himself? He left his quarters in Fredrikstad, traveled to Svinesund, crossed the ice into Sweden, but didn't get farther than a Norwegian battery set up there. A Swedish squadron of dragoons captured him, suspecting him of spying. He was taken to Gothenburg and forced into service as a musketeer in the so-called Royal Guardmaster's Regiment. With this regiment, he marched toward Finland around midsummer last year. About six weeks ago, he found an opportunity to escape and has since traveled back overland, returning voluntarily due to remorse over his offense.

Has he previously been accused or punished for desertion or other offenses? No, but he has received arbitrary punishments for minor offenses, which Captain von Blendermann also confirmed.

Does he have anything to say in his defense? No, but he begs for mercy, having returned voluntarily out of remorse for his wrongdoing.[102]

The court sentenced him to run the gauntlet, restart his enlistment, and repay the uniform's cost, showing the strict military and moral boundaries he crossed.[103]

Pedersen's story shows how geography can mirror a moral landscape. Pedersen's desertion begins in Fredrikstad, but it is the frozen water over to Svinesund that provided the material condition for escape. The ice itself acted as a temporary bridge, shifting the landscape and creating a new national border for him to cross. Without this seasonal change, this escape would likely have been impossible, and this intention to escape punishment for pawning parts of his uniform would quickly be gone. The frozen water, a geographic condition, enables this escape, but it also leads to an unexpected capture and forced service in Sweden, as the ice funnels him to patrol shores. His actions are constantly reshaped by surrounding agents, and the landscape becomes an actor of entrapment. such as the frozen strait allowing Pedersen's escape, but it remains neutral, favoring no side. The ice road that aided his escape was not a secret, patrols were well aware of its use and lay in wait for those who crossed it. Similarly, the long, overland route back from Finland, taken six weeks before his return, shapes both his physical suffering and the moral weight of his decision to come back. Other actors reinforce this network, the pawned uniform becomes a source of shame and fear, military law, inflexible and codified, limits the officers' ability to consider his remorse. We can see here that the penal system again is part of decision-making, affecting the soldiers to flee. Even with money, his debt to the company plays a subtle but present role. Pedersen's desertion is not a simple breach of duty, but a product of a dense network in which shifting forces first enable escape, then force a return.

Case 13: Niels Erissen

In January 1805, a quiet military courtroom witnessed the interrogation of Husar Niels Erissen, a 23-year-old soldier and trained blacksmith. Erissen, granted a period of open leave during the previous summer, initially stayed in the city, working in hayfields. But one day, in a drunken

[102] Riksarkivet, Akershus festning auditøren, Justisprotokoll, 1785-1808
[103] Ibid

moment of impulse, he headed westward to the rural outpost of Lønsberg. There, geography served not only as a setting but as an instrument of quiet rebellion. The distance between the military structure and the open farmland became his escape route. In Lønsberg, he found refuge in blacksmith work for a local farmer, Hans Hansen Hanum. This rural space physically and symbolically removed from the discipline of the garrison, offered temporary freedom and purpose. For two and a half months, Erissen lived unnoticed by his commanders, his only cover a false claim of extended leave. Yet it is telling that he returned voluntarily, without having committed any other crime or lodging a single complaint. He offered no clear reason for his desertion; perhaps the reasons were buried in the landscape itself, a desire for autonomy found in open fields rather than barracks. Having no other offenses and he returned on his own, the court showed Erissen mercy. He was only ordered to reenter his contract and was spared corporal punishment.[104] Hussar Niels Erissen's desertion reveals a network of actors shaping his actions and the outcome of his trial. Rather than seeing desertion as a simple moral failure, ANT highlights how identities, actions, and agency are constantly in motion and forming shifting networks. Geography stands out as the key non-human actor, something that comes together with Erissen's own ability to work as a blacksmith. In Lønsberg, Erissen could shed his military role and adopt a civilian identity as a blacksmith. This shift illustrates how geography helped reconfigure his place in the network from soldier to autonomous laborer. He could live in a new location away from his former life as a soldier because these two factors played together, a place no one knew who he was, and a skill that gave him a livelihood. His blacksmith tools and trade also acted with agency. They gave him a chance at survival, supporting his transformation and completing the conditions for his desertion. But still forces like the military code and the oath continued to influence him, even in his absence. This suggests that the institutions still retain their power through invisible but effective networks. These institutions can maintain pressure at a distance, and Erissen's return suggests that their influence remained strong. His desertion became a fight with himself within a field of competing obligations and invisible constraints. The local community in Lønsberg also played an important role in supporting Erissen's desertion. Rather than exposing him to the authorities, the residents accepted and assisted him, while also giving him a livelihood, enabling his

[104] Riksarkivet, Akershus festning auditøren, Justisprotokoll, 1785-1808

transition from soldier to blacksmith, a civilian. Their involvement extended the network around his escape, while blurring the line between obligation and civilian life. This collective support was crucial, providing protection and social legitimacy that helped Erissen evade detection and maintain his new identity, even only for a time. The community's role highlights how human actors actively shape the networks of power and autonomy, for if he wanted to with the locals' help, he could have stayed gone for longer. This network only crumpled when this former network's force was too strong, and he eventually went back to his former group.

Case 14: Jonas Erichsen

In October 1789, Jonas Erichsen Restved, a 29-year-old musketeer from Modum, stood before a military court at Akershus Fortress. Having served eight of his twelve-year enlistment, he was now on trial for desertion and theft. Erichsen deserted his post on June 30th, after being denied release to return to civilian life, broke into a fellow soldier's chest, and stole a civilian passport.[105]

Did he desert on June 30th? - Yes.

How did he obtain fellow soldier Peder Erichsen's civilian passport? - He broke into Peder's chest and took it, intending to use it under Peder's name.

Why did he desert? - He had requested release to become a civilian but was denied. So he took the passport and left.

Did he receive all due provisions and fair treatment? - Yes, nothing to complain about.

Did he take his uniform items with him? - Yes, but they were old and worn out while he was away.[106]

He journeyed far south, eventually reaching Mandal and Arendal coastal towns, A good distance from Akershus. There, he labored aboard an English ship, earning a five-Riksdaler note, his first taste of independence from military life. Erichsen also met fellow deserter Jakob Nielsen, whom he kept stealing aboard the ship with. Erichsen was when a few months caught again in Mandal.[107]

[105] Riksarkivet, Akershus festning auditøren, Justisprotokoll, 1785-1808
[106] Ibid
[107] Ibid

Jonas's desertion was a shift in the network of relations that defined his identity and agency. By taking the passport, he didn't just steal a document, he changed its role, enrolling it into a new network where it now represented his civilian identity. The passport shifted identity from Peder Erichsen to Jonas, enabling his movement beyond the army's reach. His desertion highlights the nature of actions, what began as a personal bid for freedom was shaped by many agents military bureaucracy, the passport, a worn uniform, and an English ship. These actors displaced Jonas's initial goal, drawing him into new networks of labor and independence. military authorities denied his freedom, the passport provided mobility, his uniform, though once a symbol of discipline, had grown useless and tattered. The bureaucracy played a part in enabling or resisting his transformation. Along the southern coast, far from Akershus, Jonas labored aboard an English ship and earned a five-Riksdaler note, a new form of validation and autonomy. Though he found work aboard an English ship and earned his first wage, he continued stealing even after becoming employed. The criminal network, once formed, began to define his actions and relationships. Tools of survival, false identity, and petty theft became embedded in his new personal network. He couldn't step out of it easily. At trial, Jonas claimed the army had treated him fairly. He insisted he had no complaints about provisions or discipline. It reads like an effort to realign himself, retroactively, with the institution he betrayed, a kind of rhetorical damage control.

Case 15: Johan Michael

For the last case, it will not be from the military court but from a new paper wanted poster. The reason for this change is to show how the wanted poster helped in finding these soldiers, but also to see how the desertion was described according to the newspaper compared to the story given by the soldier themself to the military court. In January of 1795, a public notice was issued in *Københavns Adresseavis* describing the desertion of a soldier from the 4th Squadron of the Zealand Dragoon Regiment stationed in Næstved. The man in question, Rytter Johan Michael, had absconded in late December the previous year.[108] *At the time of his escape, he was dressed in a white woolen jacket, uniform trousers, shoes, and stockings, as well as a forage cap; but has since been seen around Sorø wearing wooden shoes and a round hat. He has a*

[108] KBH. Adresseavis : 1795-01-26

concealed/dodgy appearance, a smooth face, short loose-hanging dark hair, dark brown eyes, is 66 inches tall, well-proportioned, 24 years old, and speaks the Zealand dialect. From his youth, he is said to have mostly sustained himself among vagabonds and by begging; from which it is presumed that he still sneaks about the country in such a manner. Therefore, all who may come across this deserter are requested to have him apprehended and to inform me thereof, as he will be fetched immediately, and a reward and costs will be paid.[109]

This shift in documentary form provides not just an alternative source of information but a completely different network of associations. Where the court system produced legally bound identities, here we see a looser, public-facing mechanism for shaping and disseminating what it meant to be a deserter. In the newspaper, he is constructed primarily through signs of deviance: described as having spent his youth among vagabonds and beggars, suspected of sneaking around. The newspaper frames him not as a wayward soldier with possible motivations, but as a threat to public safety, someone to be caught and neutralized for the community's protection. We can see from Forrest's work around the French soldiers and the cases from the Denmark-Norway cases that having a social and local network was an important factor if you tried to desert. Therefore, reintegration into civilian life would be far more difficult once the deserter was cut off from supporting networks. Unlike in military court testimonies, where the deserter might offer his own narrative and attempt to justify or explain his actions, the newspaper functions as a mediator that speaks over and for him. The poster does not merely describe him, it activates a network of readers, observers, and potential informants, transforming the general public into extensions of military surveillance. The wanted poster translates Johan Michael's desertion into a public task. The public becomes part of the actant-network, alerted, enrolled, and mobilized through the textual and material cues offered by the poster.

Summary on cases

Desertion from the Danish army, when viewed through the lens of ANT, emerges not as a straightforward act of rebellion but as the outcome of complex and shifting networks of

[109] KBH. Adresseavis : 1795-01-26

different actors. Each desertion attempt examined here is not simply a case of one man walking away from duty, but rather an unfolding process involving bodies, landscapes, institutions, tools, documents, weather, and communities, each using influence differently. During the analysis, there is what I would call five central factors recurring that I will reaffirm. If we start with the first one, across nearly all cases, geography operates not as a setting but as a non-human actor that actively participates in shaping the outcome of the desertion. The coastlines and harbors in cases like Nübling, Mogensen, Anderssen, and Erichsen offered potential escape routes, often imagined as corridors to freedom. But geography could also betray the deserter with storms, checkpoints, visible escape paths, and known routes transformed the landscape into a trap that worked as all these cases ended up with a recapture. Nübling's leaky boat and the storm that stopped his first escape, or Mogensen's capture at Kalundborg harbor, show how geography's affordances are never fixed, they go back and forth between enabling and restricting. Even inland geography held dual roles. The countryside, as seen in Bruns, Jensen, and Erissen's cases, could either hide the deserter or expose him. The night and side roads Bruns relied on lost their power when dawn revealed him to hostile locals. In contrast, Lønsberg's openness and Erissen's skills as a blacksmith allowed him to temporarily reconfigure his identity from soldier to laborer. But in these cases, we can see that desertion was not only geography, but it also hinged on objects, the second factor. Uniforms, boots, passports, and boats each shaped the ability of the soldier to move between roles. Mads Jensen's missing boots disrupted his status as a soldier and opened ambiguity about his desertion. Jonas Erichsen's stolen passport allowed him to construct a false identity. Anderssen's use of shackles and slave clothes, then their removal, symbolized his transformation, while Erissen's blacksmith skills became a tool that where key in sustaining his new civilian role. These material items don't just symbolize transitions, they help produce them. Their availability or absence shifts what the soldier can do. The third and one of the most decisive factors was human support networks. Soldiers who aligned themselves with sympathetic civilians extended their actor network beyond the military's reach. Locals could provide shelter, food, false identities, and emotional reinforcement. In contrast, soldiers who lacked ties to the rural or harbor communities they moved through were swiftly reported and recaptured. The absence or presence of local empathy could completely alter the network's

success, something that could also be used as a weapon against the deserters. The fourth, the military as an institution, with its disciplinary codes, surveillance mechanisms, supply systems, and moral judgments, acted even from a distance. Soldiers like Gulbrand Pedersen and Niels Erissen returned voluntarily, not because they were physically caught, but because of these institutional actors' rules, guilt, obligations still held power, and the idea that if they went back, there would be some leniency. These are abstract, invisible actors, but ANT shows they are still real. The oath of enlistment, a captain's authority, or fear of gauntlet punishment continues to operate even when the deserter is far removed from the barracks. Last and fifth, the role of media and public participation, something that would not naturally come through in the soldier's testimony. The newspaper wanted poster did not portray deserters as someone in service, but instead framed them as vagrants and a public menace, evoking images of criminality. The Michael case shows the network created by the newspaper and how it influenced the soldiers, as the reading public became the eyes and ears of the military. The deserter's personal intentions were overwritten by a broader social script of deviance, reducing desertion to a threat against civic order. This shows some civilians turned on the soldiers, as we can see in some of the cases, rather than helping a rather important factor if you wanted to escape. Whereas court testimonies allowed deserters to offer explanations and present their own narratives, the wanted poster replaced this with institutional framing, stripping the individual of voice and enrolling the general population into a diffuse system of surveillance and control.

Conclusion

When it came to life as a soldier in late 18th-century Denmark-Norway, it was far from ideal. This becomes clear when we examine prior research and, more specifically, through the readings of the selected *justitsprotokoller*. These records reflect many of the same themes previously established in the history told before, soldiers often lived in poor conditions, received harsh punishment, and had limited freedom. Many of the cases confirm these realities, but when looking more closely at individual examples, it also becomes apparent that the reasons for desertion were not always the same. While general patterns exist, each case

carries its own context and complexity. Many of the desertion cases show the fact that life in the army was harsh. For some, this alone was enough motivation to desert. It is also shown that certain individuals never intended to serve at all, rather, they joined the army solely to collect the enlistment bonus offered when they signed a contract and then planned to desert shortly after. However, what stands out even more clearly in the records is the fear of punishment. A considerable number of deserters did not flee simply because of hardship, but because they had made a mistake, broken a rule, committed a crime, and feared the consequences. The disciplinary system described by scholars like Heinsen aimed to prevent misconduct through the threat of punishment.[110] Yet ironically, it seems that in some cases, this same system may have driven soldiers away. Faced with the likelihood of severe penalties, many found desertion to be the lesser of two evils. This presents a troubling paradox, a system intended to enforce discipline may have inadvertently encouraged the very behavior it was designed to suppress for some of the soldiers. Still, not all desertion can be explained by punishment or opportunism. Some soldiers attempted to join foreign forces, such as the Swedish army, or tried to transfer to other regiments within Denmark. The assumption may have been that life in a different military context would be better, and they would receive a sign-on bonus. Some were caught and returned to face the consequences. Another notable group consisted of those who, for personal or emotional reasons, no longer wished to serve. Some expressed a longing to see family, others felt they no longer found meaning or satisfaction in army life. A few claimed simply that they wanted to be free men. Whether these reasons were true or only convenient justifications is difficult to say with certainty, but then we see repetition of the statements across different cases, suggesting that these feelings were more than just rhetorical, as they are from different years or parts of the nation. Desire for personal freedom, even in vague or idealistic terms, was also a recurring theme.

Thus, it is not possible to identify a clear single reason why soldiers deserted in this period. The cases reflect a spectrum of motivation, economic, emotional, and circumstantial, without one true truth. Yet within this diversity, certain patterns stand out. As we more than once see, the soldiers talk about harsh conditions, fear of punishment, while

[110] Johan Heinsen. “Mercenary Punishment: Penal Logics in the Military Labour Market

been shown lack of long-term commitment, and the pursuit of personal freedom. These insights, while drawn from individual cases, shed light on a broader structural reality within the military system of Denmark-Norway during the late 18th century.

Understanding why soldiers deserted also leads us to the question of how they managed to do so. Desertion was not a simple task. The Danish-Norwegian state maintained tight control over its garrison towns and implemented surveillance systems to monitor movement. That was why to better understand the mechanisms that enabled this, it is useful to draw on Actor-Network Theory, which helps show the connected relationships between people, environments, and materials. One of the most influential factors when looking at these networks was geography. Nature and landscape did not serve only as a setting, but it actively shaped the possibilities when it came to desertion. Geography could hide or expose, enable mobility, or lead to recapture. For soldiers like Halvor Anderssen and Jonas Erichsen, their familiarity with the sea gave them access to sea routes, and this knowledge of the terrain offered them chances to flee. Their escapes were aided by networks of people who were either sympathetic or indifferent. For others, such as Peter Mogensen and Peter Christopher Bruns, geography served more as a trap, steering them into areas where they were easily detected or met with unsympathetic locals. Geography thus functioned as a kind of funnel, directing deserters toward paths, paths the state already anticipated. Even without official travel papers, many deserters moved through predictable routes, which made it easier to locate and recapture them. Local communities also played a vital role, as presented through Forrest's work.[111] In some cases, they helped deserters by providing them with food, shelter, or simply choosing not to report them. In other cases, they did the opposite, aiding authorities by identifying the fugitives. These records highlight the changing role of the public, as deserters who were within the social contexts could either be protected or exposed. The outcome of some desertions often hinged on whether the deserter could find supportive individuals along the way. Moreover, success or failure depended on many variables weather conditions, forged or real documentation, visibility, physical stamina, and the ability to navigate surveillance

[111] Forrest, Alan I. *Conscripts and Deserters : The Army and French Society during the Revolution and Empire*

systems. The desertions were constructed moment by moment through the unpredictable interaction of man, matter, and environment.

Actor-Network Theory has offered a valuable lens for analyzing how desertion occurred, not simply why. Life in the Danish-Norwegian army was harsh, but desertion was never just a matter of personal will or hardship. Instead, it was formed through shifting networks of people, objects, spaces, and institutions. If we look at Peter Mogensen's failed escape from Kalundborg, we can see how his forged passport, missing uniform, and the harbor itself all acted as components in a network that broke down under surveillance. In contrast, Halvor Anderssen succeeded by aligning with actors such as the forests, barns, civilian clothing, and finding maritime access. ANT helps us understand these cases not just as isolated acts but as a large network shaped by both human and nonhuman actors. Geography, far from neutral, acted either as an ally or a trap. Documents, boots, tools, even the night become a part to either strengthening or weakening a network. These shifting networks reflect Bruno Latour's uncertainties, which were introduced. Actions are never purely personal, objects carry an agency, and identities constantly transform. Desertion, in the 1800 century, wasn't a single act but a process of shifting power, materials, and environments. ANT does not explain desertion by pointing to one cause, it reveals how escape was made possible, or impossible, by the relations that formed and failed along the way.

In this thesis, I have sought to contribute to the existing knowledge on military desertion by analyzing a selection of cases from the Danish-Norwegian army. While the motivations behind desertion have been explored in prior research by others, I have focused more on how specifically desertion occurred and how individuals navigated the environment and the networks around them to flee military service. By focusing on the act of escape itself, rather than only on its causes, I offer a perspective to studies less worked with, as earlier studies have primarily investigated the structural factors such as the lives of the soldiers during service or what happened after they got caught and tried. The cases analyzed here largely involving soldiers stationed in Norway and on Zeeland and Fyn near Sweden, reveal patterns of movement, opportunity, and failure that can enrich our understanding of the desertion process within these regions. While this study has primarily used cases involving soldiers who were recaptured, it opens the door for future research comparing those who were caught with those

who successfully remained at large. Such a comparative approach could further illustrate the social, geographic, and strategic factors that differentiated the successful deserters from those who failed, as the ones in this thesis. Thus, this thesis not only contributes to understanding how desertion occurred but also shows the journey during which it was carried out

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