

Chapter 3. The Gavia Army.



Gavia.
Memoriadecartagena.

Ezquerria del Bayo in his 1844 *Datos y Observaciones Sobre la Industria Mineria* wrote:

‘Gavia is the name given to the gang of boys who are put to work bringing ore to the on-setters at the shaft station, or in the case of a poorly laid out mine, bringing ore to the surface, passing the baskets from hand to hand. Among these boys, three or four of the brightest are chosen as correos (couriers) and mencheros who have a reale or two extra on their pay’.

The correos were at the beck and call of everyone in the mine. They carried with them candles, oil cans and wicks to service the men’s lamps. They also had the wearisome task of taking the tools, blunted by use, all the way up to the mine’s forge to be sharpened. They then had to take replacements back down the seemingly endless ladders to the waiting workers. The mencheros carried the mechas or fuse cartridges for the barrenos to plug into the holes which they had drilled, ready for blasting.



The correos took the miners’ tools for sharpening.

Getty Images.



The menchero carried the fuse cartridges to the barrenos.

The gavia army was divided into sections dependent primarily on the age of the child, but also on his capacity to carry heavy loads. In theory, gavia primera were 18 or older and capable of carrying between 18 and 22 kilos of mineral from the face to the shaft. Gavia segunda were youths between 15 and 17, and capable of carrying between 12 and 18 kilos, while the third category, gavia tercera were children who were, in theory, between 12 and 15, able to transport loads of 12 kilos. They were paid according to their classification. Since non of them needed to show, or even possessed, a birth certificate, it is reasonable to suppose that they and their fathers were ‘economic with the truth’ when stating their age. Certainly, there were children as young as 10 working in the mines.

The conditions in which these youngsters worked were horrendous, dark, dank and dangerous. Long hours, both day and night, in poorly ventilated galleries and stopes, sometimes cold and other times suffocatingly hot. Breathing air full of the acrid smelling fumes from tallow candles and lamps of rancid oil. Picking their way through a labyrinth of narrow passage ways full of gunpowder smoke, dust and broken rock, carrying loads far too heavy for their growing bodies. The phrase used to describe how they carried these loads was ‘tirar de costilla’ because of the cords of their esparto back-packs against their bony ribs, or costillas. Over time, their backs became callused by the chaffing of the esparto, a condition known as tortoise back. Added to their misery was their overseer, the dreaded Capataz de Gavia.



Ore was carried on the boys' backs.

Simonin.

Whilst Bayo accepted the employment of children without demur, he was shocked by their treatment at the hands of these foremen. He wrote:

'As can be seen, they (the boys) all understand what needs to be done. So what strikes me as strange is the habit of the gavia foremen of always being armed with a whip, as if they were dealing with slaves or horses, and I note that they mercilessly mishandle this mark of their authority. I know full well that it isn't easy to order a gang of lads, away from their town, and from their circle, and out of the reach of parental control, but it seems to me that a thin rod would suffice, similar to that held in the military.'

Bayo was writing in 1844, but things were no better in 1883 when J Pie y Allué, director of the Vera School of Mining Foreman, wrote:

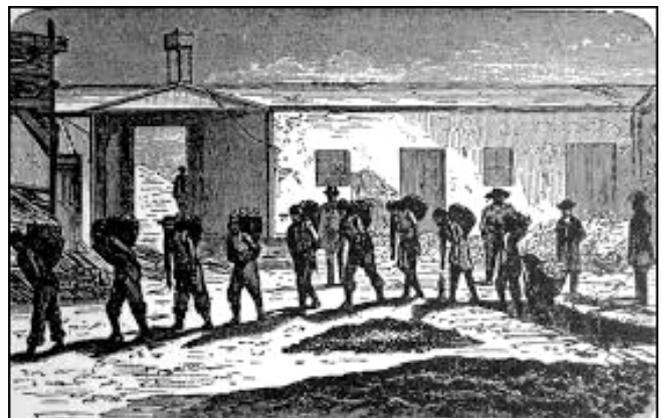
'You don't have to be tender hearted to be sad watching gangs of children, hauling around all day and all night, on their bare backs, baskets of ore through miserable rises persecuted by the foreman's lash when they do not run quickly enough to clear the debris.'

Nor were things any better in 1899, when Souviron wrote in an article for the Revista Minera Metalúrgica y de Ingeniería:

'Slithering through galleries and hard to access winzes and loaded with a heavy basket of mineral, circulate, one after another, these wretches, resembling a monstrous accordion of huge ants.'

Men carrying mineral from an American mine in the same way as the boys did.

scielo.conicyt.cl



Things were only a little better for the boys who worked in the dust and the blazing sun, dressing ore at the surface. or those who worked in the heat and toxic fumes of the smelters. A handkerchief over the mouth and nose was little protection against lead poisoning as they went through the fume tunnels, scraping the deposits off the walls so that it could be recuperated. Yet, despite the privations and hardship they, apparently, were all cheerful. According to Bayo:

'It's necessary to be a Spanish lad in order to bear such tremendous fatigue, because, despite so much work, they go up and down, singing and prancing, telling jokes to all whom they meet on their way, especially newcomers'.

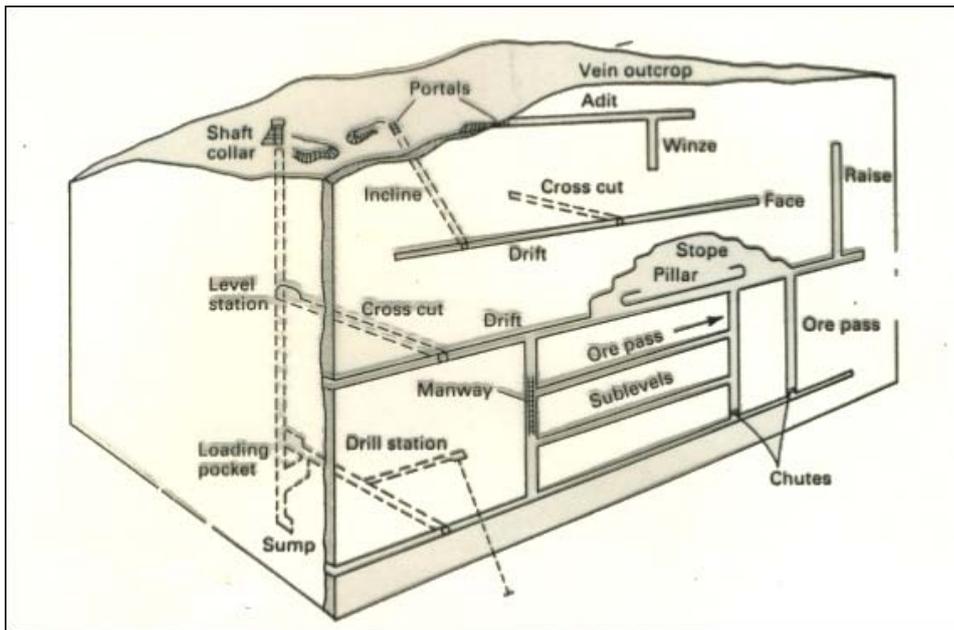
The playfulness of the young is irrepressible it seems, as other accounts tell of them playing tricks on the foreman in the dark, and of finding ways to avoid some tasks. The luckiest boys were those who worked with the muleteers, although, there are accounts, written by foreigners, of the boys' cruelty towards the beasts in their charge.

The question that needs to be asked is, why did children make up a third of the workforce of a mine as profitable as Observación, and in some mines 50%? One reason is the fact that there were no women employed in the Almagrera mines unlike in other parts of Spain and indeed the whole of Europe. Elsewhere, women did most of the ore dressing and in some areas worked underground, carrying material, most especially in coal mines. Another reason was that the low wages paid to the men meant a means of augmenting it was necessary in order to feed a family.



Women dressed ore in other parts of Spain, but not in the Sierra Almagrera.

The main reason for the high numbers of children working underground in the Almagrera mines though, was the poor layout of the workings. Bayo bemoaned it in 1844, and J Pie y Allué in 1883 was, if anything, more scathing. According to him, apart from those mines employing competent mining engineers forceful enough to stand up to the owners and to command the captaces, the mine workings left much to be desired. Instead of ordered gallery levels, adits, ore passes, rises and winzes, in the Almagrera the wish to get rich quickly led to chaotic workings. Poor access shafts and rises gave access to galleries that simply followed the uneven paths of the veins, and winzes communicating with lower galleries were haphazardly sited. Many mines had no fixed rule for the separation of the levels or for the direction of the galleries, which were of inadequate dimensions made worse by the accumulation of waste material in them.



A well ordered mine, something not found in the Almagrera.

mineral-resources-and-mining

With such irregular, haphazard workings it was impossible to lay tracks in the galleries for small waggons which could be pushed manually, or hauled by animals. Ore passes, where the ore could be allowed to fall into waiting waggons were unknown and inclined shafts, fitted with winches existed in only a couple of mines. In the mines at La Unión in Cartagena where such winches did exist, they were operated by children as can be seen in this picture.



Children operating an underground winch at La Unión.

Rogelio Mouzo Pagán. Crónicasmineras.blogspot.com



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Effectively, there was only one transport system available, and that was the callused backs of those hundreds of boys who struggled on all fours up the rough steps in the rises, and picked their way along rock-strewn passageways to distant extraction shafts bent under weight of their load, all the while, spurred on by the threat of a lashing.

Gavia.

Memoriadecartagena.

Child Labour.

The concept of children not working until they are in their late teens is a modern one. Many would argue that today we have taken things too far the other way. Are we in fact doing children and young adults a disservice by not allowing them to experience the responsibility of contributing to the family finances? Do we think that children, who have never been allowed to go anywhere on their own, will suddenly become street-wise? Or those, who have never helped around the house, will magically be able to fend for themselves? Children learn by imitation and, throughout the ages, accompanied their parents as they went about their daily tasks. In the home and in the fields and workshops, learning skills and helping out was simply part of growing up and becoming a member of a community. Industrialisation put an end to that, and as adults were sucked into the new economy, so too were their children. In some respects some of a miner's children in the Almagrera were more fortunate than others since they were required to help the womenfolk work the land while the men were away. Elsewhere, throughout the whole of Europe, children were put to work, often to the detriment of their health and to their physical development. Physicians everywhere were noting that, along with other ailments afflicting them, the growth of many working children was stunted. Malnutrition and excessive demands upon growing bones were taking their toll. So were parents being cruel, putting their children forward for work, or, were they accepting the cruel reality that the additional wage helped put food on the table? Were the mine and factory owners being exploitative when the wages that they paid were insufficient for a worker's needs? Was the State colluding in this abuse?

1873. The first labour law in Spain the 'ley Benôt' was enacted by the First Republic. It decreed that no children under the age of 10 should be employed: children under 13 should have no more than a 5 hour working day while those over 13 could work no more than an 8 hour one. It was universally ignored.

1900. The law prohibited children under 16 from working underground, and outlawed night work for those under 14. It stipulated a maximum 8 hour day with two hours of education daily which were not counted in the eight hours. These restrictions paralysed some mines in Murcia province, and the owners petitioned against the law. The City Council of La Unión approved a request for night work and underground work for children under 14 on the grounds that such work constituted a basis for sustenance for families. Elsewhere, things carried on as before.

1902-1910 The decade saw a raft of legislation governing child labour. The Royal Decree of 1902 prohibited children under 16 from working in mines. They were to have a 66 hour week and Sundays off. What happened to the 8 hour day for those over 13 stipulated in the 1873 law? This 11 hour day gives some indication of the extent that the previous laws were flouted. Also, up until this point, mining had been exempted from the Sabbath Day restrictions. The Royal Decree of the Ministry of the Interior in 1908 prohibited those under 16 working in the mines and quarries from cutting and extraction activities. It also banned the transport of ore on the head or shoulders in the galleries. The law of 1910 prohibited the employment of minors of under 18 years from working underground if in contact with explosives. Few restrictions were ever enforced.

The job of enforcing and controlling these regulations was down to the so-called mining police, comprising of the mining engineers who were effectively self-policing. (Or not, as the case maybe.)

Possibly because of mining's importance to the economy, in 1924 and again in 1940, workers' safety in mines and quarries was trusted exclusively to the Mining Engineers. Under age workers were not high on their list of priorities, in fact, from an economic standpoint it was good mining practice. As one engineer pointed out, young children carrying ore underground more than compensated for the lower weight they transported by the speed at which they carried out the task. They were more concerned with the prevention of accidents which halted production than with assessing the age of a child. When everyone, from the children themselves, their parents, the mine owners, engineers and physicians, were complicit in the deceit, it is small wonder that child labour continued in Spain long after it had been largely eliminated in other countries.

However, in the words of Ángel Hernández Sobrino from his blog *Los Niños Mineros*,

“It is estimated that there are currently one million children in the world working in mines and quarries, Asia, Africa and South America being the continents where there is most child exploitation. These small miners spend ten or twelve hours a day extracting various minerals from unsafe and unhealthy underground workings, extracting gold from river floods, transporting clay to make bricks, or pounding rocks in quarries to turn them into gravel. In addition to the danger of losing their lives or being disabled, most suffer from malnutrition, which causes them to deteriorate physically and mentally, and all of them will lose their childhood years without receiving the education that would allow them to enjoy a better future”.



Philippines, MSNBC News.



India, The Logical Indian.



The worldnews.net



treasure.net

Calls for 'greener' cars, and the other modern devices that require batteries - our laptops, mobile phones, games consoles, etc., further add to these children's misery.

Google search 'child miners' for yourself, but be prepared to be shocked by what you see.