

European and Colonial Resistance to Slavery

From its beginnings in the fifteenth century through the nineteenth century African slavery flourished throughout the New World. Nearly all of the major European powers participated in and contributed to the rapid rise of the transatlantic slave system, and all of Western Europe benefited from its lucrative profits. Countries such as England, and later the United States, grew incredibly wealthy as a result of slavery. However, over the course of the nineteenth century all nations in Europe and the Americas gradually abolished their involvement in the slave trade and the institution of slavery itself.

In 1802, Denmark was the first of any European state to abolish the slave trade. However, England and the United States traditionally receive recognition by scholars as the leaders in abolishing the transatlantic slave trade throughout Europe and the New World. In 1807 both England and the United States passed legislation that abolished the international slave trade. Although this was a major first step in the eventual abolition of slavery in the New World, it did not do much to temper the quantity of enslaved Africans transported across the Atlantic to live a life of bondage. During the nineteenth century the majority of slaves were sent to labor in the prosperous colonies of Cuba and Brazil.

Slavery throughout the British Empire continued until it was finally abolished in 1833, and slavery in the United States persisted until the end of the Civil War in 1865. Unlike other slave populations in the Americas, slaves in the United States saw natural population increases, and therefore the slave-owning South was less dependent on the transatlantic slave trade. The United States profited enormously from slavery during the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly in the cotton-producing southern states. The northern states also participated in and profited from the institution of slavery. The North's textile industry produced clothing worn by slaves in the southern United States and in the Caribbean. New England's shipping industry also profited from transporting southern goods such as cotton overseas to Europe. But it was in the northern states that the abolition movement took hold and eventually divided the country and helped lead the United States into a bloody civil war.

The antislavery campaigns that promoted the abolition of the slave trade—and later, of the institution of slavery—in both England and the United States emerged from a variety of different moral, religious, ideological, and economic factors. Scholars continue to debate which of these were ultimately the most salient, but it is now generally accepted that a combination of multiple factors led to the abolition of the slave trade, and ultimately, slavery itself.

Religious Factors

Religious organizations were some of the first groups to challenge and oppose the transatlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery. In particular, Quakers were at the forefront of the abolition movement, starting their campaigns against slavery as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century. Quaker belief promoted the idea that the light of God's truth existed in every man and woman. This democratic concept

extended to all peoples, including enslaved Africans. By 1776 Quakers were subject to expulsion from their community if they owned slaves. Quakers living in England and the United States created organized antislavery efforts. In 1783, six English Quakers, on behalf of the London Society of Friends, submitted a petition against the slave trade to Parliament with over 300 Quaker signatures. Afterwards, the London Society of Friends established a nondenominational abolition group as a way to attract additional religious groups to participate in the antislavery movement.

The antislavery movement significantly increased in popularity following the formation of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 by a group of English Evangelical Protestants and Quakers. The Committee circulated a series of petitions, which were signed by large numbers of people. Abolitionists would also travel throughout England working to establish local abolition committees. The Committee distributed pamphlets depicting the horrors of the slave trade and the inhumane treatment of enslaved Africans. Literature, such as William Cowper's poem "The Negro Complaint," was another tool that abolitionists used to disseminate the true horrors of slavery to the British people.

Writings by Africans, such as Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, also became popular during this period. Another popular form of abolitionist campaigning was the slave narrative. Abolitionists recorded slave narratives of escaped or freed slaves and published them as a way to exhibit the realities of slave life. The former slave Olaudah Equiano personally wrote the most famous account of slavery. His narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African*, published in 1789, became one of the most widely read slave narratives.

Abolitionists frequently took advantage of research and statistics to bolster their antislavery arguments and campaigns. The abolitionist Thomas Clarkson was instrumental in gathering information about slave ships and the major cities involved in the slave trade. Clarkson's information proved immensely constructive for William Wilberforce, who became the abolition movement's leading advocate and spokesman in Parliament. Wilberforce and his like-minded colleagues in Parliament were sometimes referred to as "The Saints" because of their constant lobbying for humanitarian causes such as reforming the penal code, improving labor conditions, and promoting popular education. For Wilberforce, abolition was his primary issue, and he worked tirelessly to achieve it even while Parliament was out of session. By 1807, twenty years after the founding of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the abolition movement had gained a sizeable number of representatives in Parliament. In the same year, antislavery groups across England achieved enormous success, as the House of Commons passed a ban on the transatlantic slave trade by an overwhelming 283 to 16 vote.

Ideological Factors

The major tenets of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, such as rationality and the betterment of the human condition, were similar to some of the primary beliefs of the Quakers. However, unlike the Quakers, Enlightenment thinkers were

overwhelmingly ambivalent regarding the issue of slavery and abolition. Some Enlightenment philosophers chose to ignore the issue of racial slavery. Many others believed that in an ideal world slavery should not exist, but some thinkers, such as the French philosopher Voltaire, believed that because the world was far from perfect, slavery was an inevitable outcome of the current state of society. As time passed, however, most Enlightenment philosophers became increasingly opposed to the institution and practice of slavery. Whether Enlightenment thinkers were in favor of abolition, against slavery in theory, or remained silent on the entire issue, the Enlightenment philosophers are credited today for introducing the topic of slavery to the larger public discussions and intellectual debates in Europe. A majority of Enlightenment philosophers were French, but England also produced a number of influential thinkers who provided the philosophical complement to the arguments made by religious abolitionists.

The major principles of the Enlightenment played an instrumental role in bringing about the American Revolution (1776–1783). The French Revolution, which broke out a few years after the successful conclusion of the American Revolution, was also heavily influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment. In both the American and the French Revolutions slavery emerged as a key issue, but in this context slavery was depicted as a matter of politics rather than race. The American colonists were afraid of becoming victims of political slavery under King George, and the French revolutionaries fought against social, political, and economic oppression at the hands of the Ancien Régime. Although the abolition of physical slavery was not realized as a result of either revolution, the antislavery language of the revolutions gave symbolic power to abolitionist movements in Europe and the United States.

The ideals of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution also sparked the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), which was the first successful slave revolt in the Americas to lead to the creation of a new state run by former slaves. Other than the American Revolution, the Haitian Revolution was the only successful eighteenth-century rebellion in the Americas to achieve independence from a European colonial power. The Haitian Revolution is considered a turning point in the history of Africans in the New World. The chaos and tumult of the immediate aftermath of the Haitian Revolution resulted in a setback for the abolition movement in Europe and the United States. However, the setback proved to be temporary, and abolition became an increasingly important movement throughout England and the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Economic Factors

Religious and ideological factors were two substantial elements that helped to end the transatlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery. Economic factors played a more complicated role in the debates on abolition. Most advocates for the continuation of slavery defended the slave trade on economic grounds. A wide array of British and American interests profited enormously from the slave trade and, it was argued, the profits from the plantation system and the slave trade also provided political defense against European rivals. For example, pro-slavery advocates argued that if

England were to abolish the slave trade it would provide France with an economic and naval advantage. The economic argument for slavery continued to be a popular justification used in the southern United States before the Civil War.

At the same time, abolition movements in England and the United States increasingly utilized economic arguments as a reason to *abolish* slavery. As opposed to discussing the economic benefits of slavery, abolitionists championed the economic profits of a free labor system. In the northern United States, the early decades of the nineteenth century saw dramatic urban expansion and economic growth, which was largely attributed to the use of a free labor system. As the North became more industrialized, slavery was increasingly seen in that portion of the country as economically antiquated.

England also started to steer away from using slave labor as the basis of its primary economic system overseas, particularly after the 1807 ban on the slave trade. During the nineteenth century England was in the process of expanding its access to new markets for its manufactured goods. Instead of trading with Africa (particularly the western coast) for slaves, English traders increasingly preferred to trade with Africans for natural resources. Other industries such as manufacturing and shipping, which had been negatively affected by the abolition of the slave trade, had access to a growing number of alternate (and over time, more profitable) international markets. In the West Indies British slave owners faced the problem of labor shortages as a result of the ban on the transatlantic slave trade. Slave plantations in the West Indies—unlike those in North America—required consistent importation to sustain the necessary number of laborers because of the relatively low number of enslaved women and the region's extremely harsh and brutal conditions. Slave owners started to turn to new sources for labor in places such as Asia.

Slavery and Other European States

England and the United States were among the first European/Western powers to abolish the slave trade. Throughout the course of the nineteenth century other European states successfully banned the transatlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery in their American colonies. The Dutch, for example, banned the slave trade as early as 1814. With regards to the abolition of slavery itself, Portugal, France, and the Netherlands abolished the institution throughout their colonies in 1836, 1848 and 1863 respectively. Sweden and Denmark, which were significantly less dependent on slave labor than other European states, abolished slavery in 1847 and 1848, respectively, with little economic consequence.

Throughout Central and South America the nineteenth century was an era of independence movements. As new nations formed out of successful colonial wars for independence, nearly all of the new governments abolished slavery in the first few years following independence. Cuba and Brazil were the two exceptions. Following independence both of the newly formed states grew increasingly wealthy using slave labor to meet the unrelenting demand for sugar, tobacco, and coffee. After the emancipation of slaves in the United States following the American Civil War, slave rebellions in Cuba finally led to the abolishment of the institution in 1886. Caving in to

international pressure, Brazil abolished its slave trade in 1850, but did not emancipate its slaves until 1888.

Summary:

- England is credited with acting as one of the leading states in the abolishment of the transatlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery itself. In 1807, Parliament passed legislation that banned the transatlantic slave trade. Over the course of the next three decades abolition movements gained momentum in England and eventually led to the successful abolishment of slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833.
- Religion acted as a major factor in the abolition of slavery and the slave trade. English Evangelical and Quaker groups united to form abolition committees throughout the country to gain popular as well as parliamentary support for their cause.
- Ideological factors that emerged out of the Enlightenment era also helped bring about the abolition of slavery. The principles of liberty and freedom that led to the American and French Revolutions also influenced the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), which was the first slave revolt to result in the creation of an independent state.
- Abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates both used economic arguments to bolster their positions. Throughout the nineteenth century the economic growth of the industrializing northern United States and England increasingly created a new emphasis on the benefits of free labor. More and more, slavery was perceived as an anachronistic economic system.
- In the nineteenth century the United States and all of the major European powers throughout the Americas abolished slavery in their colonies. Independence movements throughout South America finally led to the emancipation of slaves throughout the region. Brazil was the last country in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery when it did so in 1888.