

Illegal Slave Trade

Although the legal slave trade in the Americas ended in the 1830s, it was not easy to enforce the ban. British naval ships patrolled the seas and coastlines, but only succeeded in seizing less than 2000 ships between the 1810s and the 1860s, which amounted to roughly ten percent of the number estimated to be transporting slaves to the Americas. What this means is that the slave trade continued illegally, but it adjusted to new circumstances.

The legal end of the Atlantic slave trade had several consequences that altered the illegal trade that continued. In Africa, some of the largest West African markets, including those on the Gold Coast, more or less dropped out of the slave trade in the nineteenth century. West Africa began exporting new goods throughout the Atlantic, particularly peanuts and palm oil, both valuable commodities in overseas trade. Regions throughout Africa diversified their role in the Atlantic economy, increasingly relying on multiple exports, one of which remained slaves in some regions. As slave markets in West Africa closed, new markets opened in East Africa and existing markets, such as the Congo and Angola, increased their supply of slaves. In fact, the Congo and Angola were the largest suppliers of slaves in the nineteenth century. Angola provided approximately thirty percent of slaves exported across the Atlantic in the nineteenth century. This was largely due to the heavy Portuguese presence in Angola and the demand for slaves in Brazil, which did not suppress the illegal slave trade until 1850.

The destination of slaves exported in the illegal trade also shifted. By the second decade of the nineteenth century, Cuba and Brazil absorbed nearly ninety percent of slaves exported from Africa in the illegal trade. Large numbers of slaves were wanted on the sugar and coffee plantations in these regions, especially as both products were experiencing a surge in demand in the Atlantic economy. Cotton also experienced a surge in demand during the period of the illegal slave trade, thanks to the invention of the cotton gin, keeping the demand for slaves in the southern states of the U.S. constant. Although the slave trade was illegal, it did little to decrease the demand for slaves to produce the goods that underpinned Atlantic trade.

All of these shifts in the Atlantic slave trade altered who controlled the illegal slave trade. The threat of British intervention and landings forced slavers to reduce the time it took to load slaves on ships to make the journey across the Atlantic. This led to the full-time presence of European agents in Africa to gather and hold slaves over long periods of time so that they could be loaded quickly once a slaver ship arrived. More permanent facilities and resources were required to achieve this end. When slave ships arrived in the Americas, they did so primarily at ports supplying Cuba and Brazil, leaving agents in these regions in control of the trade. While merchants from Britain, the United States, and France still had a hand in the illegal trade via middlemen, and still procured slaves, they took no prominent direct role.