

## Suppression of the Atlantic Slave Trade

Beginning in the last decades of the eighteenth century, abolitionists and free blacks throughout Europe and the Americas had clung to the hope that the banning of the slave trade would bring about the end of slavery as an institution. If political opinion about the slave trade could change, a change that began in Britain and then spread to France and the northern United States, so too could public opinion about the institution of slavery as a whole. The moral and philosophical arguments of the early anti-slavery movements in these regions received a boost in the early years of the nineteenth century from two major developments. The first was the economic prosperity ushered in by the Industrial Revolution in Britain and the northern United States. In both places, a paid workforce produced goods that generated wealth without the use of slave labor. Slavery, then, was not an economic necessity. The second was the abolition of slavery in Haiti – which won its independence from France in 1804 – and the new Latin American republics that won independence from Spain in the 1810s and 1820s. The example of these new nations, combined with the legal prohibition of the slave trade by Britain and the U.S., inspired increased calls to suppress the slave trade and slavery itself throughout the Americas.

The British led the way in calling for the suppression of the Atlantic slave trade and in persuading European nations with colonies in the Americas to comply. They were instrumental in convincing the Congress of Vienna in 1815 – the meeting of European nations after the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe – to formally condemn the slave trade. They also pressured European nations to sign treaties allowing British crews to inspect any ships suspected of carrying slaves, as they did with Portugal in 1817 and also the Netherlands. These moves fueled anti-slavery groups in Britain, which were organized on a grand scale, held mass meetings open to the public, and regularly circulated petitions to end slavery. They successfully convinced the British Parliament to abolish slavery in its Caribbean colonies in 1833. After another revolution in France in 1848, the new government abolished slavery in its colonies. This was the second time France abolished slavery, the first being in 1794, in the wake of the Great Revolution of 1789. The first attempt, however, was reversed when Napoleon came to power. With the 1848 Revolution, abolition stuck. In Spanish America, the new Latin American nations immediately abolished slavery after successful revolutions in the 1810s and 1820s, although enforcing abolition took some time. This left only Cuba and Puerto Rico in Spanish hands, where slavery persisted until the 1880s.

In the United States, abolitionists modeled their efforts on those of British abolitionists. They ramped up their campaign in the 1830s to end slavery by publishing pamphlets, newspapers, and circulating petitions to sway public opinion. The American Anti-Slavery Society reached over 100,000 members by the late 1830s. However, cotton, which was produced with slave labor, rose to a dominant position in Atlantic trade and the economy of the southern states. In other words, slavery was a domestic institution in the United States in a way that it was not in Britain or France. This also meant that the states that used slave labor to produce sought-after raw materials could mount stiff legal resistance to the abolition of slavery. They did so through their constitutional rights as

states. In this context, the abolition of slavery shifted from a moral and philosophical issue to a firmly political battle, one that would be fought politically in Congress and, beginning in 1861, on the battlefields of the U.S. Civil War.