

Fiche d'activités dossier pédagogique



The evolution of the Atlantic Slave Trade

There were **three reasons** that shaped the demand and supply of slaves across the Atlantic, each situated in another continent. **The first reason** was the demand for labour in the New World, where the indigenous Amerindian population rapidly declined after the arrival of the first European explorers. It appeared that the Amerindians had no immunity against common diseases imported from the Old World such as the flu, scarlet fever or even just a common cold. Some estimates put the decline of the Amerindian population at 40%. [...] The demand for labour was particularly high in the tropical parts of the New World, where new products such as tobacco and sugar could be cultivated for export to Europe and North America. In order to obtain a sufficient number of labourers in their colonies in the New World, the Spanish and Portuguese enslaved some of the Amerindians in addition to bringing in slaves from their home countries as African slaves were a common sight in Spain and Portugal. [...]

The **second reason** for transferring slaves from Africa to the New World was the fact that Europeans did not enslave one another. [...] During the first decades of the English, French and Dutch colonisation in the New World, the need to obtain workers outside Europe did not arise immediately as it was possible to obtain temporary labour by contracts of indenture. In the ports of England, France, and the Netherlands boys and young men with an adventurous spirit could sign a contract with an employer in the New World for a certain number of years in exchange for a paid passage to the colonies, food and housing. [...] The sudden decline in the migration of indentured labourers after the 1650's was caused by those, whose indenture had expired and had returned to the ports in Europe from which they had departed. There, they spread the news about the wretched conditions, the hard work, the bad housing and food and the high mortality in the primitive and completely male pioneer societies in the colonial Caribbean. That caused a dramatic decline in the number of indentured migrants willing to go there and the European governments had no way of forcing their subjects to migrate overseas.

The Beginning of the Atlantic Slave Trade

The **third reason** for the transfer of slaves from Africa was the fact that in that continent slavery was widespread and that the slave trade there had existed for centuries, and was well organized. Before the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, the existing slave trades within Africa and to the Near East already comprised large numbers of slaves. That explains why the Europeans, once they had arrived on the Westcoast of Africa, only needed to offer more than the African and Arab buyers in order to obtain as many slaves as they wanted. [...] The first Atlantic slave traders were the

Portuguese as they had been the first to face a shortage of labour in their colony in the New World. The Spanish also experienced shortages, but they were not able to buy slaves in Africa as in 1496 the Treaty of Tordesillas instigated by the Pope had divided the non-European world in two parts: Africa, part of Latin America and part of Asia were given as a loan to the Portuguese crown and the other parts to Spain. That division made Spain dependent upon foreign merchants for the supply of slaves to Spanish America.

After 1600, the English, the French and the Dutch broke the Iberian monopoly in the Atlantic and also created colonies both in the moderate as well as tropical zones of the New World. For some decades, their demand for African slaves was far smaller than in the Iberian colonies because of the ample supply of indentured labourers. Of this second group of invaders, the Dutch were first to switch to slaves once they had conquered part of Portuguese Brazil in 1630. The French and English followed suit and each of these three countries concentrated their slave trading on a separate part of the African coast.

After 1650, the colonists in the English West Indies exchanged tobacco for sugar cane. That demanded much more manpower in addition to expensive mills. As has been pointed out, at the same time it became increasingly difficult to obtain indentured labourers from Europe. For a couple of years, the employers still could rely upon the arrival of Irish and royalist prisoners of war, who had been sent to the West Indies as forced labourers, but after the end of the English Civil War in 1660, that supply dried up. No other groups in Europe could be forced to move to the West Indies, and thus the colonists and especially the first sugar cane planters in the English Caribbean had no other choice but to turn to Africa for slaves. Later their colleagues in the French, Dutch and Danish West Indies followed suit.

The English and the French had started to trade in slaves well before 1660. The Navigation Act of 1651 disallowing foreign slavers to sell slaves in the English colonies proves that the early English slave trade was sufficient to provide the first sugar plantations in the Caribbean with slaves from Africa.[...] In 1658 the French founded their first slave trade company, the Compagnie du Cap-Vert et du Sénégal, and the English created a well-organised company with a monopoly in the slave trade in 1672, the Royal African Company. The Dutch had started their West-Indische Compagnie as early as 1621. [...] The Dutch, English and French created a second slave trade circuit in addition to the existing one in the South Atlantic. The first circuit was dominated by slave ships originating in Portugal and Portuguese Brazil. [...] The new, second circuit consisted of slave ships from England, France, the Netherlands. [...] These two slave trade circuits remained remarkably separate. The second, Caribbean circuit had its heyday during the eighteenth century, when more 3 million slaves were landed there, while Brazil and Spanish America received a similar number of slaves during the 19th century. That difference reflects the difference in the demand for slaves, which in turn was based on the difference in the development of plantation agriculture. In the Caribbean, the expansion in the number and size of the plantations was most rapid in the English, French, Dutch, and Danish colonies during the 18th century, while Brazil and Cuba peaked in the 19th century. The slave imports did not only fuel expansion, it also allowed the two plantation zones with slaves to offset the natural decline that was due to the high mortality. The only exception to this rule was North America, where the slave population experienced strong

demographic growth, similar to that of the free population. That explains why around 1800 about 30% per cent of all slaves in the New World lived in the U.S., while this area had only received 3,6 % of the slaves disembarked in the New World.

Ending the Atlantic slave trade

During the last decades of the eighteenth century the number of popular voices opposing the slave trade increased, especially in Great Britain and the US, where the new religious communities such as the Quakers, Baptists and Methodists started a campaign to outlaw the slave trade and slavery. In spite of the economic advantages the slave trade, their campaign met with success in 1806, when a majority in both houses of the British parliament voted in favour of a law to make the slave trade illegal for British subjects as per March 1, 1808. However, as can be seen from table I, the slave trade continued to the end of the 19th century under the flags of those countries that had not outlawed the slave trade or in circumvention of these laws. In order to stop the illegal slave trade, Britain, France and the US stationed naval squadrons off the coast of Africa, but these ships were able to only intercept a small percentage of the illegal slave ships. Because of the expansion of plantation agriculture, especially in Brazil and Cuba, the prices for slaves continued to rise in the New World allowing for higher profits and these stimulated illegal slave traders to take greater risks and to invest in faster sailing vessels. Also, the slave trade within Africa increased as the suppression of the Atlantic trade lowered the price of slaves in Africa itself allowing more Africans to become slave owners. The last transatlantic slave voyage probably was made in 1867 to Cuba.

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