Triangular Slave Trade

Ultimately, only eighty-two grants received congressional confirmation. This represented only 6 percent of the total area sought by land claimants. Thus, through the Court of Private Land Claims, the U.S. government enlarged the national domain at the expense of hundreds of Hispano villages, leaving a bitter legacy that would fester through the next century.

In the first half-century after ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, hundreds of state, territorial, and federal legal bodies produced a complex tapestry of conflicting opinions and decisions. What was clear was that the citizenship rights seemingly guaranteed by the treaty were not all that they seemed. The property rights for former Mexican citizens in California and New Mexico proved to be quite fragile. Within a generation, the Mexican Americans who had been under the ostensibly protections of the treaty became a disenfranchised, poverty-stricken minority, as the promises of the treaty remained only promises.

SEE ALSO Alamo; La Raza; Mexicans; Texas Rangers; Zoot Suit Riots.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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TRIANGULAR SLAVE TRADE

In the fifteenth century, Western Europe’s sphere of influence began to expand. The opening of the Atlantic Ocean to world trade, specifically to trade within the confines of the Atlantic itself, played a major part in this growth. Portuguese adventurers navigated the coast of West Africa in search of gold and spices, capitalizing on technological advancements in shipping and developing new products for trade, with sugar being one of the most important. Over the centuries, sugar cultivation spread from India to the islands off the coast of West Africa and then to the Caribbean and Brazil in the sixteenth century. This expansion involved the employment of enslaved Africans to work the plantations. The combination of the three geographical regions (Europe, Africa, and the Americas) into a pattern of trade that involved the movement of labor from Africa to the Americas to produce goods for European markets has sometimes been referred to as a “triangular trade.”

THE PRODUCTS OF TRIANGULAR TRADE

While sugar production was the cornerstone of this system, other commodities, such as tobacco, rice, cotton, coffee, and indigo, also fit the same pattern of using enslaved African labor on fertile land in the Americas to supply markets in Europe. Spain and Portugal both developed sugar production in the New World, extending production that had previously been located in the Mediterranean, the Canaries, Madeira, and the island of São Tomé. Environmental conditions made the Caribbean and Brazil ideal for the cultivation of sugar. However, Spanish interest in sugar diminished with the discovery of silver and gold in the territories of modern Mexico, Peru, and Bolivia. In contrast, the Portuguese monarchy invested in sugar production along the coast of modern Brazil, which led to the flooding of the European market with sugar.

In response to demand, France, England, and the Netherlands developed their own sugar colonies in the Americas, and they also introduced other crops into the plantation regime. As a result, they invested heavily in the purchase of enslaved African labor. These countries established trading posts in Africa for the purchase of slaves, and they then, in turn, founded their own colonies in the Americas, such as the English colonies established on Barbados in 1625, Jamaica in 1665, and the Gold Coast in 1661.

The Atlantic trading system appeared to operate in a triangular pattern, with European manufactured goods taken to Africa in exchange for slaves; enslaved Africans taken to the Americas to work; and the production of the Americas returned to Europe. An estimated 12 million Africans were forcibly moved to the Americas, especially to the Caribbean and Brazil, where many died under terrible working conditions. Their descendants suffered bondage until slavery was abolished in the late nineteenth century. The patterns of transatlantic trade and intercontinental exchange were far more complex than a simple triangle, however. The major components of the system united the Atlantic into a global phenomenon. European economic development was based on slave labor and benefited Europe and European colonies. The triangular
trade was a circuit that relied on enslaved African labor, and it was an important factor in the emergence of the modern world economy.

Economic specialization and political factors complicated the picture, creating a far more complex network of production and trade than a simple triangular pattern. European countries often wanted to restrict trade to maximize profits within their own networks, once again suggesting a triangle across the Atlantic, but even these efforts, known as mercantilism, failed. Instead, trade flowed where it was profitable, at least in the long run, and entrepreneurs and adventurers tried different products and techniques in seeking profits from the trade across the Atlantic.

An examination of the goods and manufactures that were important in the trade with Africa, and which made the purchase of slaves possible, demonstrates the complexity of the system. Many of the items sold to Africa were objects used for money, such as cowrie shells (which came from the Maldive Islands in the Indian Ocean), strips of textiles that were produced in India, or objects of European iron and brass that were used as coins. Indeed, silver dollars were also used. The importance of these pieces of money in the trade with Africa demonstrates a level of economic development within Africa, one consequence of the triangular trade concept that is usually overlooked. Other trade commodities included weapons, particularly guns and ammunition, which had the effect of increasing the intensity of warfare in western Africa, and thereby increasing the number of enslaved Africans available for sale across the Atlantic. Increased warfare also led to further exploitation within Africa. Many other consumer goods—such as alcohol, tobacco, and sundry items of hardware, textiles, and jewelry—were also important, reflecting the buying power of elites in Africa. Again, these goods were often associated with the procurement of slaves. But the metals, alcohol, and tobacco came from the Americas, reflecting a bilateral trade, not a triangular one.
TRADE AND THE NATIVE POPULATION

Similarly, a singular focus on the triangular dimension of the Atlantic world that emerged with the spread of sugar overlooks the interaction with the indigenous population of the Americas. With the arrival of Europeans the Amerindian societies suffered near genocidal population losses as a result of enslavement, forced labor, spread of disease, poverty, and simply being murdered. Without this catastrophic destruction of the native inhabitants, there would have been little free, unoccupied land for exploitation, and there would not have been the demand for the importation of workers, whether they were indentured Europeans or enslaved Africans. In the sixteenth century, Bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas complained of the social impact of the European presence on the Amerindians, but only in the last decades of the twentieth century did scholars attempt to connect the plight of the Native Americans to the practices of land expropriation and slavery.

Scholars discovered that when Europeans arrived in the Americas, they encountered a variety of Amerindian populations, which were sustained by different levels of economic development. In some places, such as Central America, the concentration of the Amerindian population was relatively large. However, the introduction of smallpox, the common cold, and other infectious diseases by Europeans led to the rapid decrease of the local populations. In addition, the European use of forced Amerindians labor in the mining industry, under heavy workloads contributed to their decimation and a resulting labor shortage. Lacking cheap labor to work the vast amount of land at their disposal, Europeans turned to Africa to resolve their labor shortage. The large-scale forced migration of Africans resulted in the growth of tropical production and increased shipments to Europe. In the Americas, European countries sought to protect their respective monopolies by forcing their colonies to trade exclusively with the metropolises. Colonial planters were obliged to sell their products to the “mother country.” Because it was forbidden to produce anything in the colonies that competed with homeland products, items such as textiles, tools, hats, food, books, clothing, and weapons had to be imported. These requirements stifled the development of local industries and the accumulation of capital in the Americas. European states also enacted navigation laws and created chartered companies to maintain economic monopolies in competition with one another. However, many ambitious traders operated illegally to evade these prohibitions to profit.

THE GROWTH OF EUROPEAN TRADE

In the late sixteenth century, the visibly increasing wealth from the overseas holdings of the Portuguese monarchy drew the attention of the British, Dutch, and French. By the mid-seventeenth century, Dutch traders in particular were participating actively in the trade through the Dutch West India Company. The Dutch were present in different regions of the Americas, from New Amsterdam to Guiana, and including Caribbean islands such as Curacao and Aruba. In 1630 the Dutch captured Pernambuco in northeast Brazil, obtaining control over sugar production there. In 1641 the Dutch also seized Portuguese holdings in Africa, such as the ports of Elmina, Luanda, Benguela, and the island of São Tomé. The Dutch West India Company monopolized the slave trade from African ports to Dutch and Spanish possessions in the Americas from 1621 through 1737. In 1648, Portuguese and Luso-Brazilian troops expelled Dutch merchants from Luanda and the northeast of Brazil. Still, the Dutch crown remained present in Netherlands Antilles, Suriname and Guiana, which enabled the slave trade to be one of the major economic activities in Holland until the end of the eighteenth century.

While the Dutch were expanding their empire, the French settled in Guadeloupe and Martinique in 1635, and they initiated trading contacts with Senegal in the 1670s. This was the beginning of the French Atlantic empire. The capture of St. Domingue (now Haiti) in 1697 increased the demand for African slaves. Slave traders sailed from France with their ships loaded with an assortment of trade goods, including metal tools and utensils (hoes, axes, buckets), textiles (European and Indian), alcohol (wine and brandy), tools (knives, swords, and machetes), and luxury items (porcelain, corral, mirrors, pearls, and decorated knives). In certain ports of West Africa, such as Saint Louis (at the mouth of the Senegal River), Elmina, and Ouidah, traders exchanged these goods for slaves. Ships sometimes transported more than 500 people at a time. In the “Middle Passage,” slaves were fed products brought from Europe or acquired in Africa, such as dried fish and manioc flour.

In the eighteenth century, British traders established themselves at Calabar and Bonny in West Africa, where they traded metal products such as buckets and agricultural tools in exchange for African slaves. British slave traders transported slaves to Barbados, Jamaica, and Antigua, but also to mainland North America, particularly Virginia and the Carolinas to produce cotton, indigo, rice, ginger, and tobacco. The profitable production of these items depended on the importation of masses of African slave laborers. While the colonial mercantile system benefited Britain, North American and Caribbean colonies depended on Britain manufactures, creating a constant demand for British imports.
SLAVERY, TRADE, AND THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

In the 1940s, the distinguished historian Eric Williams proposed that the triangular trade stimulated the development of capitalism in Britain. According to Williams, African slaves acquired British goods, which helped the expansion of local industry in Britain. Meanwhile, African slaves produced valuable tropical products whose profits reverted to the development of industries in England, ultimately leading to the accumulation of capital and financing the Industrial Revolution. African slave labor was the foundation of the triangular trade and, ultimately, of British industrialization and development. According to Williams’s critics, however, the slave trade and the plantation system were only one part of a complex British economy that expanded in many directions at once. Nonetheless, capital and expertise in finance and management were essential to the Industrial Revolution, and slavery and the slave trade played their part.

The trade across the South Atlantic between Africa and Brazil was in many ways bilateral and did involve Europe as much as trade with the Caribbean and North America did. Geographical conditions facilitated a direct link across the Atlantic, for winds and ocean currents forced ships sailing from Portugal to navigate to Recife or Salvador, Brazil, before changing the trajectory to disembark at Elmina in West Africa or in Luanda, south of the River Congo. Consequently, ship captains also had to stop at islands or ports in the New World to restock their food and water supply and to buy New World trade goods to be sold in Africa. This trade allowed New World merchants to accumulate capital through the sale of tropical products, including tobacco and alcohol. These merchants invested their profits in the slave trade. After 1700, Brazilian traders displaced Portuguese merchants, becoming the major slave traders supplying Rio de Janeiro and Bahian markets. Thus, in addition to a triangular trade, there was also a direct two-way trade between Africa and the Americas.

The Atlantic basin became a cohesive entity during the era of transatlantic slavery, with seaport cities arising on both sides of the ocean. The displacement of the approximately 12 million Africans who were forcibly moved to the Americas was a major demographic change in the Atlantic world. The profits generated by slavery increased the wealth of the Europeans involved, but it had negative effects on African economies. Scholars debate the number of victims because it is difficult to determine the number of people who died during the wars and crises in Africa that resulted in enslavement or during the long journeys to the coast from the interior and during the Atlantic crossing. African societies sold their enemies to Europeans in exchange for alcohol, guns, and textiles, among other foreign goods. However, textiles did not last, alcohol was consumed, and guns increased the production of captives. At the same time, Africans and their descendants were forced to work on plantations, in mines, and in urban centers in the Americas, producing wealth they were unable to acquire, and which was later used to purchase more African slaves.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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TRIRACIAL ISOLATES

Scattered throughout the eastern United States, particularly in the Southeast, there have been some 200 or more communities known as triracial isolates, which comprise individuals of mixed (blended) European-American, African-American, and Native American descent. Pluralistic in nature, triracial communities have historically lived apart from blacks and whites in isolated rural enclaves. In the early twenty-first century, large numbers of individuals...