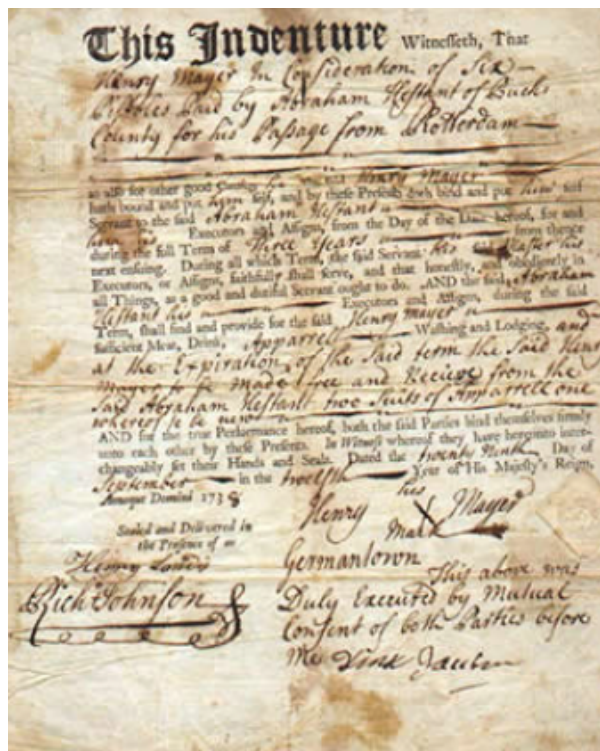


Slavery, Forced Labor, and Migrations in European Empires

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ABSTRACT

The history of slavery in the early modern period was not limited to the Atlantic slave trade, for the latter relied on the slave trade in the Mediterranean and Central Asia, as well as on the experiences of enslaved “whites” on the other side of the Atlantic during the seventeenth century. The slave trade linked to plantations continued in the nineteenth century, and from mid-century onward was accompanied by forms of more or less forced immigrant labor—from Asia in particular—toward the Americas and the Indian Ocean. In the twentieth century, international institutions prefer speaking of forced labor rather than slavery, in order to emphasize the breaks with the past that have occurred, while minimizing the continuities.



Indenture signed by Henry Mayer, with an “X,” in 1738, binding him to work for Abraham Hestant of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, 1738. Source: Immigrant



African Americans resting and shooting dice at edge of cotton field, circa 1900.

Source: Library of Congress.

Early rise: slavery and domesticity

It would be wrong to associate [slavery](#) solely with the rise of plantations in the Americas and the [Atlantic slave trade](#). Beginning in the medieval period, a number of European powers such as Venice, Genoa, and later Spain (already genuine empires) possessed colonies in the Eastern Mediterranean, and bought slaves from Russia, Central Asia, and India, in addition to captive Muslims. These slaves were then placed in the first sugar plantations of the period (Tyre, Candia, Sicily, and the coast of the Middle East) or in the metropole, where they were primarily employed as domestic workers. Between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries, approximately six million slaves transited between Central Asia, India, and the Mediterranean.

The expansion of the Ottoman Empire disrupted the source from Central Asia, while Spain and Portugal broadened their sources in the sixteenth century to include North and West Africa. This traffic expanded to the Portuguese islands of Madeira and Cape Verde, where sugar plantations were established. During the second half of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese bought approximately 80,000 slaves per year along the coasts of West Africa, to whom they added 41,000 slaves per year bound for the Americas. The Spanish sent nearly 100,000 slaves to their mines and plantations in America between the late fifteenth and late sixteenth centuries.

During this same period, the English initiated a plantation project in one of their first colonies, Ireland, which was officially recognized as such. The Plantation of Ulster used extreme forms of enslavement on local peasants under the English yoke, with the help of a few local landlords as allies. This enslavement of whites subsequently became widespread. During the first half of the seventeenth century, France and England forcefully recruited white “migrants” or *engagés* (indentured laborers in England)—a hidden form of slavery—whom they sent to their American colonies. These contracts provided for the captain or buyer in the colony to pay for the price of the voyage in advance, with the migrant working for free for seven years in exchange. During this time the indentured laborer could be transferred or sold, and could not marry without authorization from his or her master. The debt could easily be extended due to a real or presumed infraction. Between 1610 and 1660, 170,000 to

225,000 indentured migrants left the British Isles for the Americas. Another 500,000 followed between 1630 and 1780.

For France, the numbers were much smaller: approximately 50,000 across all destinations between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The primary reason for this is that the transatlantic voyage was seen as an even harsher punishment than being put in prison for vagrancy, or being exposed to a possible food scarcity in the metropole.

Another difference with England was the role of women: in the English case, men were largely in the majority, but there were also numerous indentured families (women and children); in the French case, it was almost exclusively single men who made the trip. Authorities sought to recruit women, especially to go to New France (Quebec). These women were taken from hospices, convents, and prisons, and were considered reproachable and “without morality”; they were forcibly sent and married to emigrants, often soldiers or criminals. Only a handful of the 800 sent between the 1650s and 1670s survived.

Massive slave trade and plantations

It was only beginning in the second half of the seventeenth century, with the rise of plantations, that the slave trade spread. The primary European powers engaged in it, doing so for a number of reasons: there were not enough immigrant indentured laborers to meet later labor needs, and they were showing increasing resistance; the colonizers also believed that the physical conditions of “whites” did not make them particularly suitable for local environments or sugar cultivation. All told, approximately twelve million slaves embarked for the Americas between the sixteenth century and the 1870s. While Spain and Portugal were the primary actors in the slave trade during the seventeenth century, in the eighteenth century France emerged as the third most important power, far behind the Portuguese and British who were in a dominant position. Finally, from the first half of the nineteenth century, up through the official abolition of slavery in the British Empire (1830s) and French Empire (1848), the slave trade indeed continued, and this in spite of the British ban on the practice in 1807. Three and a half million African slaves arrived in the Americas, most (2.4 million) on Portuguese ships.

These networks were actually global. In the Indian Ocean, a substantial slave trade connected to the rise of Islam was in place beginning in the tenth century. In these regions, enslavement and slavery connected to debt were—and still are—of major importance. Slaves also circulated between Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Persian Gulf, and East Africa. Between 1400 and 1900, 2.5 million slaves were sold along the coasts of the Indian Ocean, 9 million of them via the trans-Saharan route; almost all of the latter were headed for the Near East, and were then partly carried off by European merchants. Similarly, once the British occupied India, they relied on local forms of slavery, and then introduced forced labor to build infrastructure or to develop tea plantations in Assam.

Abolitionism and forced labor

The abolitionist movement spread slowly, initially in the United Kingdom (late eighteenth-early nineteenth centuries), much later in France (around the mid-nineteenth century), and even later in Spain and Portugal (second half of the century). Concurrent with this process, France and the United Kingdom [revived the indenture contracts](#) of the seventeenth century to contend with a lack of both labor and cash on the part of planters. However, this time it

was particularly Indians and Chinese (coolies) who were concerned. Presented as free contracts, these relations actually reproduced the characteristics of slavery in many respects, and were forbidden only during and after the First World War. Between 1850 and 1914, 11 million Chinese emigrated to Southeast Asia (British and Dutch possessions), three-quarters of whom signed indenture contracts, with the remainder being paid for by family and village networks. Two million Indians, primarily from Bengal, migrated to British colonies: Mauritius, Southern Africa, and the Caribbean. Another 1.5 million went to Ceylon, and 2 million to Burma.

Finally, beginning in the 1890s, the European powers that had just partitioned Africa—justifying themselves by the need to abolish slavery—did not hesitate to subject local populations to coercion and [forced labor](#). This attitude was extreme in the Belgian Congo, and was no less violent in the French Congo and South Africa.

During the 1920s, the League of Nations and one of its outgrowths, the ILO, declared slavery as officially abolished, and announced their intention to combat forced labor. There is one nuance: none of these treaties and recommendations was truly applied, and decolonization ended with no genuine labor law or forms of social security being created in European colonies.

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