CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PORTUGAL, SPAIN, AND THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

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INTRODUCTION

The place of Portugal and Spain in the slave trade was in many ways shaped by the two Iberian powers’ colonisation projects in the Americas and Africa. To begin with, Spain never had any significant foothold in Africa, a sharp contrast with Portugal, a country whose history of maritime expansion had since the fifteenth century been deeply intertwined with the African continent. In addition to positioning Portugal as a key force in shaping the history of the slave trade, this dynamic also led to a set of complex relationships between the two Iberian powers and their colonies during the era of the slave trade from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

Similarities between the Portuguese and Spanish slave trades were legion. In both imperial powers, the trade paved the way for the rise of powerful colonial merchants, became deeply intertwined with the social and economic fabrics of colonial societies, and commanded strategic attention by policymakers in Lisbon and Madrid. Significantly, neither Lisbon nor Madrid necessarily objected to the increasing role of colonial merchants in the management of the Spanish and Portuguese slave trade. The merchant guilds of Seville did attempt to limit the influence of foreign slave traders, but with minimal success. Spanish American commercial networks generally benefited from access to foreign slave trading networks. The deregulation of the slave trade to Cuba was first proposed by Cuban creole elites, with Francisco Arango travelling to Spain to make the case that the opening up of the slave trade to Cuba was central to developing sugar plantations on the Caribbean Island (Ferrer 2014).

The early phase of the Iberian slave trade was deeply intertwined with Portugal’s first encounter with African societies in the fifteenth century. Portugal had relied on African enslaved labour from Senegambia to develop sugar production on the Atlantic islands and continental Portugal (Almeida Mendes 2012). On the Gold coast, where Portugal had erected a fort in 1482 seeking to tap into thriving gold production, it became a key provider of enslaved labour to African powers.
(Heywood and Thornton 2007). To satisfy local demand for labour, the Portuguese established a maritime slave trade from central Africa, where Portugal had managed to establish a presence soon after its arrival to the Gold Coast. These experiences gave Portugal vital expertise in moving African people across the ocean (Alencastro 2000; Thornton 2007).

But the slave trade only became a dominant force with the rise of the demand for labour in Portuguese and Spanish America. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, Portuguese trading networks had become critical to the procurement of enslaved Africans to the Spanish Caribbean and Mexico (Wheat 2016). Later, and perhaps more consequentially, the slave trade escalated again due to the growth of sugar production in Brazil. In both cases, the reliance on African labour was dictated by the depletion of Indian labour in Portuguese and Spanish America, where the spread of diseases brought by Europeans produced a significant setback in local indigenous populations, as well as laws restricting access to native people’s labour (Schwartz 1978; Monteiro 1995). Of course, the enslavement of the native people of Brazil did not come to an end (Metcalf 2006). However, by the mid-seventeenth century, Africans and African descent individuals comprised the bulk of the slave population in Brazil.

The reliance on African labour to produce or extract natural products in the tropics was to some extent a continuation of previous Portuguese experiments in Africa, where Portugal had succeeded in creating a sugar based plantation society on the island of São Tomé by the early sixteenth century (Seibert 2016). São Tomé’s global domination of sugar production was later replicated in Brazil, allowing the Portuguese to move beyond the bartering economy that had characterised the early phase of colonialism in South America to the large-scale production of a commodity [sugar] whose demand was skyrocketing in Europe. By the end of the sixteenth century, as São Tomé’s sugar production declined among other factors due to slave revolts, Brazil emerged as the largest producer of sugar in the world (Schwartz 2004). To meet sugar production’s increasing labour demands, the Portuguese turned to Africa, building upon trading networks and expertise that had preceded their arrival to Brazil in 1500 (Alencastro 2000).

**LEGALITY OF SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE**

Slavery in Spanish America and Brazil persisted for centuries because few colonisers questioned the legality or moral implications of enslaving Africans and their descendants. Fray Bartolomé de las Casas infamously called for the importation of black slaves to exempt the indigenous population of brutal working conditions but repented shortly thereafter. The abolishment of indigenous slavery was codified in the New Laws of 1542 but enforcing them proved extremely difficult outside of Central Mexico and Peru. Nonetheless, Spanish religious officials were forced to confront the incoherence of abolishing the enslavement of Native Americans but accepting that of Africans. The Archbishop of Mexico, Fray Alonso de Montúfar, urged the Spanish monarch to stop “this captivity and business” in African captives in a scathing 1560 letter which was disregarded (Sierra Silva 2018). Tomás de Mercado, Bartolomé de Albornoz, and Luis de Molina raised similar critiques during the second half of the sixteenth century but failed to influence the leading theologians and jurists of their day (Malagón Barcelo 1974).
While the enslavement of the indigenous people of the Americas produced intense debates in the Spanish empire, the enslavement of Africans yielded a rather muted reaction in Portugal, largely because African slavery was already known in Europe prior to the expansion to Africa and Brazil. It would take almost 100 years for Spanish Jesuit scholar Luis de Molina’s analyses of enslavement in Africa to come to light. While framing enslavement as “unjust and iniquitous” and a sin, he challenged the view that the slave trade was legitimate because of its role as an engine of conversion of Africans into Christianity (Hespanha 2001). By then, however, having been under way for almost 70 years, the slave trade had already become integral to the economic fabrics of imperial Spain and Portugal.

By the early seventeenth century, the Jesuit priest Alonso de Sandoval could condemn the religious perils imposed on African souls, but he did not explicitly challenge slavery or the slave trade. After all, even he pertained to a religious order heavily invested in slavery throughout the Atlantic world (Sandoval 1987). The renewed abolishment of indigenous slavery in 1672 was extended to people of Asian descent— as indios orientales—in Spanish America, but otherwise reinforced the association between slavery and African heritage (Seijas 2014). Spaniards constructed disparate ordinances related to slavery, some of which were collected in the Recopilación de Leyes de los Reynos de Indias in 1680. However, they never produced a specific set of slave laws comparable to the French “Code Noir” of 1685. Two Capuchin friars, José de Jaca and Epifanio de Moirans, challenged the legality of enslaving Africans and their descendants during the 1680s. Unfortunately, their writings did not reach a wide audience and did not impact Spanish American views on slave ownership in the second half of the seventeenth century (López García 1982).

During the late eighteenth century, Spaniards did attempt to regulate slavery through the Código Negro Carolino. Drafted in 1784, the Código attempted to produce a more efficient economy in Santo Domingo that required standardising the obligations of slaves and masters. Compared to the French codes of 1680 and 1724, however, the Spanish law was considered to favour the interests of the enslaved over their masters, especially in Louisiana. Slaveholders in Havana, Caracas, Nueva Granada, and even Santo Domingo protested aggressively to the point that it was never enforced (Malagón Barceló 1974). The code was likely read and filed without further controversy in places where slavery was declining, and the slave trade was not as significant by the late eighteenth century. However, neither slavery nor the slave trade was banned in Spain or its American domains.

The prohibition of the slave trade to mainland Portugal in 1761 intended to prioritise the shipment of enslaved Africans to Brazil, Portugal’s main colony in South America, where enslaved labour was in acute demand due to mining and agricultural activities. Slaves travelling from Angola or Brazil to Portugal with their owners could claim the 1761 ban as a means to secure their freedom (Ferreira 2012). In 1773, the Marquis of Pombal decreed a free birth law, which would end the enslavement of fourth-generation slaves born in Portugal (Nogueira da Silva and Grinberg 2011). However, as documenting these genealogies was not necessarily an easy task, most mainland slaves would remain enslaved. Ideologically, slavery was still firmly in place in Spain, Portugal, and most of their American dominions at the start of the nineteenth century.
SPANISH AMERICA

The island of Hispaniola served as the initial testing ground for sugar production and the slave trade in the early Spanish Caribbean and mainland. By 1504, Spanish colonisers had sent enough African slaves in small groups and individual licenses to the island to elicit a formal complaint by Governor Nicolás de Ovando. Demand for Africans (as field hands, servants and military auxiliaries) grew considerably over these first decades of Caribbean colonisation. Approximately 4,000 enslaved Africans were sent to Hispaniola between 1519 and 1528, although half left the island for other destinations (Guitar 2006). Early planters and governors may have entered occasional contracts with Genoese slave merchants, but by the 1550s the Portuguese established themselves as the bona fide providers of enslaved Africans (Palmer 1976; Aguirre Beltrán 1946; Ventura 1999). The early to mid-sixteenth-century slave trade to Spanish America ran through Cape Verdean providers with ties in Seville (Torrão 2011). Early slavers drew heavily from the Senegambia region and benefited, for a short time, from the general instability surrounding the Wolof kingdom (Green 2014). Concerns about the introduction of enslaved Muslims to lands destined for Catholicism would gradually condition the entry of individuals from this region. Religious concerns aside, demand for Senegambia captives remained high among Spanish colonists throughout the colonial period (Sandoval 1987).

By the 1560s and 1570s, small populations of enslaved Africans could be found in most Spanish American urban centres (Saunders 2010; Blumenthal 2009). Elite city-dwellers counted on this enslaved population for domestic service of any and every variety. Slave men laboured as water carriers, bodyguards, coachmen and muleteers, while enslaved women worked as wet nurses, cooks, and maids. Ownership of large retinues of such domestic slaves became a mark of distinction among urban elites. Thus, we must understand enslaved Africans as far more than unremunerated labourers. Africans became extremely valued as status markers “who produced and performed wealth” for middling and elite Spaniards (Bryant 2014). Bishops, city regents and successful merchants invested heavily in the transatlantic slave trade precisely because they vied for political and cultural power. These dynamics were evident throughout the core areas of Spanish America by 1580, although less markedly so in peripheral areas of the empire (Chile, New Mexico, etc.).

Two late sixteenth-century developments led to the intensification of the transatlantic slave trade to Spanish America: epidemic disease and the Iberian Union. The demographic collapse of indigenous populations due to smallpox and typhus led to 80–90% depopulation rates in large swaths of the empire. Port cities, such as Veracruz, Cartagena, and Havana, were already dependent on black slave labour by the late sixteenth century (De la Fuente 2008; Siemens 1998; Wheat 2016). Faced with alarming depopulation, Spaniards increasingly turned to enslaved people of African descent for their labour needs. In the political arena, Philip II's ascent to the vacant Portuguese throne in 1580 enabled the expanding Lusophone merchant networks to streamline the slave trade more effectively to Spanish America. The Portuguese had developed extensive commercial and political ties with West and West Central African states since the fifteenth century. However, it was the development of São Paulo de Luanda during the late sixteenth century that truly enabled the Spanish monarchs to partially redirect the slave trade to Spanish America. Philip II
and III of Spain heightened demand for African slaves by dictating pro-indigenous policies that restricted the type of work that Spaniards could expect from Native Americans. At the start of the seventeenth century, royal bans on indigenous labour in sugarcane plantations and textile mills stimulated the transatlantic slave trade (Zavala 1947). Spanish planters and mill owners initially resisted these costly measures, but by the mid-seventeenth century their operations relied almost entirely on enslaved Africans and their descendants.

Spanish colonists established a remarkable dependence on Lusophone slaving networks up until Portuguese independence. By 1641, no less than 529,800 African captives had entered Spanish American domains (Borucki, Eltis, and Wheat 2015). On average each slave ship carried 287 slaves during the 1581–1640, although fraudulent record-keeping could lead to considerable variations. The vast majority of these captives were introduced by Portuguese slave traders with commercial ties in West and West Central Africa. The establishment of Luanda, the capital city of the Portuguese colony of Angola, resonated with slaving interests in Veracruz and Buenos Aires (Schultz 2016). Upwards of 80% of the transatlantic slave trade to Veracruz originated in Luanda, a direct reflection of Portuguese militarism in West Central Africa (Vila Vilar 1977; Heywood and Thornton 2007). Officially, the crown only granted incoming slavers intermittent access to the merchants of Buenos Aires, leading to the rapid emergence of a contraband silver-slave trade. In New Spain a more established slave trading network connected the port of Veracruz with the planters of Xalapa, Izúcar and Michoacán. A simultaneous demand for enslaved Africans as status markers and textile workers also thrived in Mexico City, Puebla de los Ángeles and Coyoacán. Overall, mining centres drew considerably less African captives than urban centres and sugar plantations. All of these settlements were defined by a constant influx of young Kikongo and Kimbundu speakers up to 1640.

In the Viceroyalties of New Granada and Peru, the transatlantic slave trade evidenced greater diversity in terms of African zones of provenance. The influx of West Central Africans was often matched and, at times, surpassed by Lower Guinean captives (Wheat 2011). Despite its Caribbean location, Cartagena de Indías served as Peru’s primary outlet for silver and entry point for African slaves (Newson and Minchin 2007). The ports of Panamá and Portobello also served as auxiliary avenues for the slave markets of Lima, Quito, and Trujillo. Cartagena would become the primary slaving port in Spanish America by the first decade of the seventeenth century. As in Veracruz and Buenos Aires, a powerful Lusophone community dictated the terms of the slave trade. Manuel Bautista Pérez, perhaps the most influential Portuguese merchant in Spanish America, developed a vast commercial empire through the Cartagena-Lima slave routes (Studnicki-Gizbert 2007). His closest business associates could be found in the largest trading houses of Seville, Lisbon, Amsterdam, Cacheu, and Angola. Tellingly, Lusophone networks of this type would only be dismantled by Inquisition officials bent on exposing Jewish practices among Spanish America’s resident Portuguese population. These systematic attacks on the greater Portuguese community disrupted the asiento trade and would factor considerably in the irregular slave trade from 1640 onward (Vila Vilar 1976).

The struggle for Portuguese independence (1640–1668) had a profound effect on the transatlantic slave trade to Spanish America. The scale of the trade to Spanish dominions diminished considerably in the 1640s, although latent demand for
enslaved Africans remained high in subsequent decades and led to a trans-imperial slave trade that often facilitated the entry of contraband merchandise. In consideration of fragmentary and isolated data, far more archival research is needed on the slave trade of the 1640s and 1650s. Many Spanish colonists sought to continue the asiento trade with the Genoese merchants Domingo Grillo and Agustín Lomelín but (as before) the latter did not have access to African slaving ports. The Grillo and Lomelín slaving contract (1663–1674) relied heavily on Dutch and English providers, such as the Company of Royal Adventurers (Franco 1984). However, the Adventurers were rarely able to fulfil their obligation of delivering an annual 3,500 African captives to Spanish America (O’Malley 2014).

The slave dépots of Barbados, Jamaica and Curaçao became the principal sources of African slaves for Spanish Americans during the 1660s. Recent research suggests that between 1658 and 1714, approximately 116,000 captives entered Spanish America through Dutch slave traders (Borucki, Eltis, and Wheat 2015). These interactions led to notable shifts in African provenance zones. Lower Guinean captives, labelled Arara, Mina, and Popo, arrived in larger numbers. The shift away from Portuguese slavers also resulted in the violent importation of thousands of captives identified as Loango. By the late 1670s, the Dutch had informally secured the asiento slave trade to Spanish America by way of the powerful financier Balthazar Coymans and his dealings with several Spanish intermediaries. Under the Dutch, the slave trade to Spanish America was no longer transatlantic in its organisation. Instead, African captives were disembarked on the island of Curaçao for transshipment to Portobello, Cartagena, Havana, and Veracruz (Beltrán 1946).

The late seventeenth-century realignment of the transatlantic slave trade away from Spanish American ports (in favour of English and Dutch entrepôts) affected certain regions more severely than others. Recent research on colonial Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador suggests that a transatlantic, trans-imperial slave trade thrived between 1660 and 1714 (Borucki 2012; Bryant 2014). Curaçao’s proximity to Venezuela guaranteed a constant influx of African slaves. Portobello also emerged as a major slave market, even if most captives sold there were then redistributed to Peru and Ecuador. A series of sugar booms along coastal Pacific valleys allowed Spanish planters to continue investing in the transatlantic slave trade. During the 1690s, slave traders could make considerable profits in the Trujillo slave market by selling captives acquired from the Bight of Benin and Kongo (O’Toole 2012). By contrast, the transatlantic slave trade to New Spain diminished considerably. New African arrivals continued to arrive in Puebla and Mexico City during the 1670s and 1680s, but by that point creoles accounted for the overwhelming majority of slave sales. The sugar-producing region of Córdoba (in the modern-day state of Veracruz, Mexico) was likely the only area of New Spain where transatlantic slavers found an expanding market during the early eighteenth century.

The Spanish American shift from transatlantic to inter-Caribbean slave shipments forced African captives into a process of seemingly unending cultural disruption. The acquisition of basic vocabulary in English Jamaica or Dutch Curaçao was rendered meaningless by yet another forced passage into Spanish-speaking domains. Linguistic and cultural similarities among Iberian captors and slave purchasers during the Portuguese asientos likely mollified this process between 1595 and 1640. By contrast, the cultural, linguistic, and religious “adaptive process” was especially
acute for enslaved Africans entering Spanish American society during the second half of the seventeenth century (O’Malley 2014). The tendency continued during the early eighteenth century with the signing of French and English slaving monopolies (Palmer 1982). Captives introduced to Veracruz, Cartagena, and other ports by the Portuguese Cacheu Company between 1696 and 1701 may be an exception to the rule, although more research is needed on this brief asiento. The slave trade to Spanish America experienced a notable diminution during most of the eighteenth century, leading to a stunning contrast with Brazil from 1701 to 1760 (see Table 18.1).

**PORTUGUESE AMERICA**

Portugal’s well-established connections with Africa and the economic and geopolitical imperative of providing labour to Brazil’s growing economy profoundly shaped the slave trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In Angola, Portugal had succeeded in carving out a colonial enclave by the late sixteenth century, precisely as Brazilian sugar production entered a phase of exponential growth. In addition to founding a city in Luanda, a significant improvement vis-à-vis coastal commercial outposts that had until then been established in West Africa, the Portuguese managed to establish a network of internal outposts that enhanced their ability to procure enslaved labour in Africa. This process was initially marked by significant military operations that produced massive numbers of captives of war later shipped as slaves to Brazil (Heywood and Thornton 2007). By the end of the seventeenth century, however, the production of slaves had mostly shifted from military campaigns to highly opportunistic trading networks, fuelled by commodities from Brazil or obtained via Brazil, that radiated out of coastal cities under Portuguese control in Luanda and Benguela.

In many ways, the tight connections between Angola and Brazil were a function of the regime of winds and currents in the South Atlantic, which helped the two colonies to interact directly while preventing more maritime ties with Portugal. These connections were also strengthened by the strategic place of Brazil in the wider Portuguese empire, particularly after Dutch attacks that severely weakened Portugal’s grip over the so-called Estado da India. While Portugal lost ground in the east, Brazil gained further prominence as a producer of sugar and then gold. Soon, Brazil would emerge as the most important player in the South Atlantic slave trade, providing commodities and funding for the internal slave trade in Africa.

However, it would be mistaken to reduce the slave trade only to the business of selling human beings across the Atlantic. By the end of the seventeenth century, connections between Angola and Brazil had long matured into a complex set of relations that stretched well beyond the economic and business dimensions of the slave trade. It was from Brazil, for example, that a fleet had departed to retake Luanda and Benguela from Dutch forces in 1648 (Boxer 1952). Several high-end administrators from Brazil went on to hold high positions in Angola, and vice-versa. The flow and counter-flow of enslaved and free people in the South Atlantic was magnified by criminal and political exiles sent to Angola not only from Portugal but also from Brazil. Against this backdrop, the slave trade catalysed multiple social and cultural relationships across the Atlantic.
Brazilian labour needs were equally key to the development of the slave trade on the so-called Mina Coast (regions stretching the Gold coast to the Bay of Benin), where by the first half of the seventeenth century, Portugal had begun facing stiff competition by several European powers seeking to first benefit from booming gold trade and then procure labour for their colonies in the Caribbean (Eltis 1999). By the mid-seventeenth century, as Portugal lost ground first to Dutch and then British merchants, its commercial standing on the Gold coast was significantly damaged. However, the Portuguese presence never fully disappeared. First, the Portuguese language remained vital to trade relations, forcing northern Europeans to learn it so they could trade with Africans. Second, the Portuguese colonies of São Tomé and Príncipe served as the basis for extensive contraband with European nations along the Mina coast.

By the end of the seventeenth century, only a few decades after diplomatic treaties that had prohibited the Portuguese slave trade on the Mina Coast, Portuguese slave vessels had returned to the region, in defiance of Dutch constraints and in response to the increasing demand for labour in Brazil after the discovery of gold in the Minas Gerais. Gold production thoroughly changed the nature of Portuguese colonialism in Brazil, moving the centre of gravity of the colony south (Rio de Janeiro became the capital city of Brazil in 1763) and for the first time paving the way for the emergence of urban centres outside coastal regions. In Africa, in a highly competitive environment, Brazil-based merchants used gold and tobacco smuggled or brought legally from Brazil to successfully bypass trade restrictions imposed by the Dutch, while also using these goods to either outflank or collaborate closely with European powers trading on the Mina coast (Schwartz and Postma 2003).

The Brazil-Mina route of the Portuguese slave trade was facilitated by geographic proximity and cultural affinities between West Africa and Brazil. In Africa, the management of the trade depended on African rulers who favoured conducting trade with Portugal over engaging in trade with other European nations (Verger 1988). In addition to sending letters to Brazil to invite the Portuguese to establish themselves in their territories, African rulers eventually dispatched embassies with official representatives to the Portuguese colony in South America. On the Brazilian side, Portugal had by then mostly outsourced procurement of enslaved labour to colonial merchants in Brazil’s major cities of Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, and Recife. Between 1700 and 1800, while approximately one million enslaved Africans were taken to Salvador, around 50% of these Africans were shipped from the Bight of Benin.

Like in the Bight of Benin, Brazilian gold production deeply impacted Angola, provoking the rise of shipments of enslaved Africans and prompting the opening of new routes of the internal slave trade. In contrast to the Bight of Benin, the Angolan slave trade was not visibly fuelled by Brazilian gold and hinged instead on the widespread use of alcohol and Indian textiles. Both products were either produced in Brazil or obtained via Brazil, thus further tightening direct ties between the two Portuguese colonies in the South Atlantic (Curto 2004). By the end of the eighteenth century, in a bid to reassert itself in the slave trade, Portugal had established royal companies and protectionist rules in Angola. However, this development was not enough to seriously disrupt bilateral ties between Angola and Brazil (Candido 2013).
Source: Tracy W. McGregor Library of American History, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA
In the eighteenth century, the Iberian slave trade accounted for over 40% of the overall slave trade. Together, Portugal, Spain, and their colonies ranked second only to the British as carriers of slaves across the Atlantic. While the Portuguese transported around two million and two hundred thousand people across the Atlantic, Spanish territories were destination to only approximately 200,000 enslaved people directly taken from Africa at the time. This all changed, however, with the rise of the Spanish slave trade to the Río de la Plata and Cuba. The trade to Cuba, in particular, radically transformed the overall history of the slave trade in the last century or so (see Figure 18.1).

The development of the Cuban slave trade is inextricably tied to the demise of sugar production in French Saint-Domingue as a result of the Haitian revolution in the early 1790s. From then onward, with the end of the British slave trade (1807), the two Iberian colonies - Brazil and Cuba - would become by far the most important destinations of the slave trade in the Americas. According to the slave trade dataset, the two colonies were the destination of almost 80% of the approximately four million enslaved Africans shipped to the Americas between 1800 and 1866. While two million and five hundred Africans were taken to Brazil, eight hundred thousand were forcefully transported to Cuba.

These numbers reflected the continuing demand for enslaved labour in the agricultural economies of Brazil and Cuba. In Brazil, the collapse of French Caribbean sugar production provoked a spike in production of sugar in the northeast of the colony near the city of Salvador of Bahia, propelling the slave trade from the Mina Coast. Due to the shared religious and cultural backgrounds of Africans brought into Bahia, a series of slave revolts convulsed the province in the first half of the nineteenth century, culminating with the Muslim revolt of 1835 (Reis 1988).

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**Figure 18.1** Arrivals of enslaved Africans to Brazil and Spanish America to 1867
Source: Adapted from Borucki, Eltis and Wheat, “Atlantic History”, p. 440
Transatlantic contacts remained strong even while the slave trade dwindled and even survived the forced migration of Africans, underpinned by cultural, social, and religious ties that defied geographic distances (Parés 2015; Castillo 2011).

It is worth pointing out that the slave trade to Brazil was part not only of transatlantic, but also part of a trans-imperial network that stretched well into the Río de la Plata. While the transatlantic slave trade to the region can be traced back to the late 1580s, recent research on the ports of Montevideo and Buenos Aires proves that the slave trade peaked from the 1770s to the 1810s. Increasing collaboration between Spanish merchants and Portuguese slavers enabled a considerable influx of enslaved Africans to the River Plate region in the last years of Spanish colonialism. Merchants based in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador established lucrative slave trading networks in the Río de la Plata.

These networks were facilitated by deregulation introduced by the Spanish Crown that opened the slave trade in the region to merchants of all nations. Silver from Potosí continued to drive slave purchases, which explains why some African captives purchased in Montevideo were sent on to Lima. The slave trade to the Río de la Plata only peaked between 1800 and 1806, when the region established especially strong ties with Mozambique-based slavers (Borucki 2015). Over 5,000 enslaved Africans entered Montevideo and Buenos Aires per year during this brief period. Only political events would lead to the temporary closing of the transatlantic slave trade to the River Plate in 1811. It is clear that were it not for the strife caused by Spanish American movements of political independence, the slave trade in the South Atlantic would have continued unabated. Even then, isolated groups of African slaves continued to arrive during the Argentine-Brazilian war of 1825–1828 that would eventually lead to Uruguay’s independence.

Throughout Spanish America, the wars for independence and the abolition of the slave trade were closely interrelated affairs. During the second decade of the nineteenth century, royalists and insurgents debated whether to abolish slavery, curtail the slave trade, and/or decree free womb laws as recruitment strategies to gain the support of populations of African descent. In 1811, Chile was the first Spanish-American nation to abolish the slave trade and establish free womb laws, although final abolition would only be decreed in 1823. By 1824 Mexico, the Dominican Republic and the Central American Federation, countries whose economies did not depend on enslaved labour, had abolished the slave trade as well.

The abolishment of the slave trade was more difficult to accomplish in the Gran Colombia region and in the island territories that would remain under firm Spanish control (Cuba, Puerto Rico). While Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Colombia all declared an end to the slave trade in 1821, slavery was firmly rooted within the social fabric and among the insurgents’ leadership. The passage and extension of free womb laws in these nations (and in Bolivia and Paraguay) is a better measure of independent countries’ unwillingness to liberate populations of African descent. Peru, a conservative bastion, allowed the entry of hundreds of slaves in the 1840s despite its early abolishment of the slave trade. Likewise, Argentina and Uruguay reopened their slave trades during the 1830s. Despite these considerable shortcomings, the slave trade to the Spanish American mainland was on its last legs by mid-century. In 1842, Paraguay and Puerto Rico decreed the abolishment of the trade, leaving only Brazil and Cuba as slave importers (Andrews 2004).
It is undeniable that the centre of gravity of the nineteenth century slave trade rested on Brazil and Cuba. In Brazil, production of coffee in the southern region of the colony and then independent nation drove the continuation of the trade well into the nineteenth century, despite suppressionist efforts. This slave trade’s route remained centred on Portuguese controlled territories in Angola and coastal Congo. In addition to sugar and coffee, the fact that slavery was deeply interwoven in the social and economic fabrics of rural and urban Brazil contributed to continuously rising demand for labour. By the early nineteenth century, new routes of the Portuguese slave trade had been opened up with East Africa (Mozambique) as well as Central Africa (Cabinda).

In Cuba, the slave trade gained momentum due to the Caribbean island’s transition from a society with slaves to a slave society at the turn of the nineteenth century. Despite the fact that coffee production was integral to Cuban agriculture, sugar reigned absolute by the mid-nineteenth century, creating a sophisticated economy that drew on investments and proximity to the United States of America, which was not only the main market for Cuban sugar but also a major economic partner that contributed decisively to the development of a railroad system that in turn led to further production of sugar. As Cuba came to dominate the global sugar market, the island remained deeply reliant on Africa for labour and criollo elites were defiant of anti-slave trade treaties signed by Spanish metropolitan power.

Interestingly, much of this transformation occurred against the backdrop of legislation aimed at banning the slave trade to the island (Norman 2012). The slave trade was controlled by a group of slave dealers who retained a cohesive identity as Spanish individuals and had direct access to colonial power (Lecuona 1998). Equally important, the sugar economy was deeply intertwined with the illegal slave trade (Zeuske 2014). Slave dealers were avid capitalists that invested in several sectors of the Cuban economy, playing a pivotal role in modernising and diversifying it (Lawrance 2014).

Despite the relative prominence of Central Africa, the Cuban slave trade drew on sources of labour that ranged widely in Africa from the Bight of Biafra and the Bight of Benin to Mozambique. By and large, the Cuban slave trade was significantly shaped by Spain’s lack of possessions in Africa. As a result, and mirroring the early history of the Iberian slave trade, the two streams of the Iberian slave trade came to intermingle significantly, particularly in the last phase of the forced migration of Africans.

In contrast, Brazil remained tightly connected with the region that had supplied most of the enslaved labour for the Portuguese colony in the nineteenth century, Central Africa. Within Central Africa, however, the slave trade underwent significant transformations as a result of British withdrawal of Atlantic slaving in 1807, which opened up opportunities for slave dealers seeking to avoid heavy Portuguese constraints in Luanda by developing the trade in regions where the French and the British had previously been active, such as Cabinda and Ambriz. By expanding the geographic scope of the slave trade in Central Africa, this development bolstered the supply of labour to Brazil while also significantly complicating efforts to suppress the slave trade.

Both in Brazil and Cuba the slave trade would eventually be profoundly reshaped by the rise of abolitionism in the Atlantic world. After 1807, the British embarked
on a global campaign to end the forced migration of Africans across the Atlantic
and Indian oceans that unfolded through several decades, combining diplomatic
and military tools. This campaign eventually led to the shutdown of the transatlantic
slave trade by exerting diplomatic and military pressure on Latin American coun-
tries and colonies and by raising the risks of investing in the slave trade in Africa. But
before the slave trade finally came to an end in 1867, another three million enslaved
Africans were taken to the Americas, almost 30% of the overall number of people
victimised by the trade.

Several factors explain why the slave trade thrived during the era of abolitionism.
First, during the first decade or so of their campaign to end the slave trade, the
British focused mostly on signing multi-country diplomatic treaties that proved only
mildly effective in curbing the slave trade. In Brazil, this led to the end of the slave
trade north of the Equator in 1815, which affected the supply of labour to the north-
east of Brazil but did little to impact the slave trade from Central Africa. Later, the
British seized upon significant political leverage obtained from their mediation of
the Treaty of Brazilian independence to impose a date for the abolition of the slave
trade from Central Africa to Brazil. However, the law that emerged from this treaty
was either not consistently applied or altogether opposed, thus only superficially
impacting the overall slave trade to Brazil in its final decades. As a result, a large
number of Africans, all technically free people as they had been brought to Brazil
after the 1831 anti-slave trade law, were illegally held under slavery.

In Africa, growing anti-slave trade politics led to the shutdown of the slave trade
in places like the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, as well as Portuguese-controlled
Luanda, the place where the largest number of enslaved Africans were shipped to
the Americas. However, the rise of abolitionism produced unintended consequences
such as the spread of slave embarkation in regions outside European jurisdiction
in Africa, significantly reducing the effectiveness of measures to curb shipments of
captives. Furthermore, in response to crackdowns of the slave trade throughout the
Atlantic, slave dealers developed sprawling networks that drew on sophisticated
business arrangements and state-of-art ships to bypass suppressionist measures.

By the 1840s, British abolitionism had morphed into a far more militarised
movement, further reducing the number of African regions exposed to the slave
trade and increasing pressure on Cuba and chiefly Brazil to end imports of captives.
Due to anti-slave trade treaties with Portugal and Spain, the British had by then sig-
nificantly expanded their ability to curb the then illegal slave trade. The British navy
could visit, search, and apprehend slave vessels sailing under Portuguese and Spanish
flags as well as release enslaved Africans they found onboard. They mounted naval
patrols that significantly encroached on Brazilian sovereignty and lead Portugal to
fear its ability to remain in control of imperial possessions in Africa.

Since Brazil became independent in 1822, Portugal had nurtured plans to develop
Angola into a new Brazil. However, the continuation of the slave trade and Britain’s
increasingly assertive military presence in Central Africa posed a perceived and real
risk to Portugal. In 1838, newly appointed governor of Angola Antonio Manoel
de Noronha stated that “the continuation of that trade is now improper without
exposing those provinces to insults by British cruisers and giving them a pretext to enter into direct negotiation with the [African] neighbours on the coast”. Anglo-Portuguese imperial rivalry would feature prominently in the geopolitics
of suppressing the slave trade in Angola and wider Central Africa. In many ways, Portuguese implementation of laws to end shipments of slaves across the Atlantic was a reaction to British manoeuvring.

The enforcement of Portuguese anti-slave trade policies initially faced significant obstacles due to the weakness of the colonial administration in Angola and Mozambique and widespread official complicity with slave traders. When an 1836 decree banning the slave trade was discussed in Luanda, merchants sitting on the Luanda Conselho de Governo promised to abide by it but only up to a point. A similar phenomenon occurred in Mozambique where half-hearted commitment to ending the trade led to more shipments of captives to the Americas. Writing about Angola, British officials remarked that

> it is perhaps right to state that it appeared to be the prevailing opinion that the authorities could not put it down because they were entirely dependent upon revenues derived either directly or indirectly from such traffic to support their colonial establishment.

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By the mid-1840s, however, Portugal had largely succeeded in enforcing anti-slave trade legislation in Luanda. This achievement was acknowledged by British authorities, who not only praised the dramatic reduction of shipments of captives near Luanda but also welcomed Portugal’s newly found commitment to halting the slave trade. Portuguese suppressionist measures coupled with British naval patrols along the African coast, exponentially increased risks associated with Atlantic slaving and prompted merchants to move away from the sale of human beings across the Atlantic. “The speculation has become a much more hazardous; that many engaged in it have been almost ruined, and that none but such as have a large capital at command can venture to carry in it, is however certain” (Ferreira 2014, 235).

However, the slave trade was still rampant in regions outside Portuguese jurisdiction in Central Africa as well as Mozambique. On the demand side, efforts to end the slave trade were further undermined by British inability to obtain the right of visit and search of vessels sailing under the American flag. Slave dealers profited from the legal protection provided by the American flag to carry captives to Cuba after the shutdown of the Brazilian slave trade in 1850. In contrast to what they had done in Brazil, the British shied away from mounting any frontal military pressure on Cuba, which had by then come under the orbit of the United States of America, prompting the British to take a more subdued approach to the end of the Cuban slave trade.

The shutdown of the Brazilian slave trade failed to end shipments of slaves across the Atlantic, largely due to continuing demand for labour in Cuba and the re-directioning to Cuba of the trade networks that had supplied captives to Brazil. Between 1850 and 1867, almost 70% of the enslaved Africans taken to Cuba originated from regions in Central Africa near the Congo River where laws passed by European powers had no jurisdiction and slave dealers could operate freely. A great deal of the trade was organised from New York City, taking advantage of extensive economic ties between the United States and Cuba, presenting a significant challenge to suppressionist forces.
By the 1850s, the slave trade had become part of a “triangular geopolitical struggle” pitting the British against the US and the Spanish over imports of enslaved Africans into Cuba. On the US side, there was growing concern about the destabilising ramifications of British suppressionist policies, which since the 1840s had become more active through activist diplomats sympathetic to the plight of enslaved Africans (Marrero 1992). While fearful that British action would lead not only to the end of the slave trade, but also slavery in Cuba, prompting slave revolts in the United States, American slaveholders were also suspicious of British free-soil policy, which had led the British to free enslaved people who made their way to British territories in the Caribbean. This situation led to calls to protect slavery through territorial expansion in Texas and Cuba as well as deep suspicion about British motives vis-à-vis the slave trade (Rugemer 2012).

By 1857, the British and American government had come to an agreement about an increased naval presence in Cuba, but this strategy backfired as presumed British abuses against American vessels pushed the two countries to the brink of war. To check Union perceived British abuses, and amid calls to war on the British by American public opinion, the American government dispatched more warships to Africa, for the first time assuming a more pronounced and consequential role in the suppression of the slave trade (Huzzey 2012). By 1861, however, the American squadron had been greatly reduced due to the beginning of the civil war in the United States.

Against this backdrop, with American authorities proposing to annex Cuba so that they could more efficiently end the slave trade, the Spanish government acted out of fear of American expansionist projects vis-à-vis the Caribbean island (Mason 2009). In 1862, the United States signed a treaty with Britain that included the right of visit and search, leading to a drastic reduction of the number of slave vessels sailing under the US flag. By then, American rationale was largely driven by the imperative of obtaining British support for the Union states in the context of the American civil war. From then onward, the number of captives taken to Cuba declined steadily until a complete halt in 1867.

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