



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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British citizens campaign for the abolition of the slave trade, 1787-1807

(1787)

1700's

to:

1807

Country: United Kingdom

Location Description: *United Kingdom*

Goals:

To get legislation passed abolishing the slave trade throughout Britain and all of its colonies.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 048. Protest meetings
- 050. Teach-ins
- 071. Consumers' boycott

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 071. Consumers' boycott

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 050. Teach-ins

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- boatmen
- members of Parliament
- merchants
- middle class women
- religious people

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

The Abolition Committee (sometimes referred to as the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade), William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson

Partners:

Charles James Fox

External allies:

Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugoano, and the anti-saccharites

Involvement of social elites:

Adam Smith, William Roscoe, Hannah More, and William Cowper

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Adam Smith
- Antisaccharites
- Charles James Fox
- Granville Sharp

- Hannah More
- Olaudah Equiano
- Ottobah Cugoano
- The Abolition Committee
- Thomas Clarkson
- William Cowper
- William Roscoe
- William Wilberforce

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 3 years 4 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Pro-slavery members of Parliament, British citizens involved in and in favor of the slave trade.

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Counter-petitions, counter publicity and leaflets

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Abolition legislation was passed

The Abolition Committee survived even after their goal had been attained to continue to help sway public opinion in favor of abolition

Their petition drives grew with each new use of the method

During the 1700's, Great Britain was a strong colonial power with extensive land holdings in the West Indies, India, and Africa. A key aspect of this colonial empire was the shipment of slaves from Africa to the sugar plantations in the West Indies.

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the conditions in Great Britain were favorable to the growth of the abolition

movement. First of all, the Enlightenment ideals of freedom, the right to happiness, benevolence, and social reform fueled the debate over the nature of freedom and the nature of man. To many, slavery did not seem to fit the ideal of the inherent freedom and dignity of man (for more on the cultural and religious climate leading up to the abolition campaign, see d'Anjou). Additionally, capitalist worldviews were on the rise. Adam Smith, considered the first capitalist theorist, argued that slavery was economically inefficient because a slave's goal will be to consume as much food as possible, and do as little work as possible. The most efficient of economies, according to Smith, was one in which people worked for their own personal gain. Finally, Quakerism (the Society of Friends), Evangelical sects of the Anglican Church (such as the Clapham sect), and the Methodist Church were growing and creating networks of British citizens that would eventually be harnessed for the abolition movement.

While there were economic, religious, and cultural conditions that were helpful to the abolition movement, it is important to note that Britain was also a strong colonial power that put great value in its land holdings overseas. Many considered the slave trade and the sugar plantations in the West Indies to be essential to Britain's dominance within the European political sphere. By the 1770's, much of the educated elite of Britain considered the slave trade morally wrong, but many also argued that Britain's power would fall without the slave trade. Additionally, King George III opposed abolition.

Throughout the mid to late 1700's, minority groups such as the Society of Friends (Quakers) started working toward abolition. Two prominent Quakers, John Woolman and Anthony Benezet, published leaflets against the slave trade, put out a petition in 1783, and started creating extensive local networks of activists to get out their antislavery message (for more information, see d'Anjou). The Clapham sect of the evangelical movement also started gathering support for the abolition movement, gathering stories of runaway slaves and defending them in newspapers and in the street. Finally, Methodists also started getting involved and were incredibly effective at creating grassroots networks of the lower middle class. Despite this, it was not until the late 1780's that dialogue over the issue became prominent in the public sphere.

In 1787, a group called the Abolition Committee (sometimes referred to as the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade) arose out of a Quaker group called the Meeting on Suffering. This new committee was made up of Quakers, as well as prominent evangelical Thomas Clarkson and lawyer Granville Sharp. Sharp had gained prominence in defending a runaway slave named James Somerset and helping him win his freedom. William Wilberforce, a young member of parliament (and a member of the Clapham sect) also joined the movement, publicly announcing his plans to present an abolition bill. Hence, the Committee had connections with the Quakers, the Clapham sect, the Methodists, and the political elite like Prime Minister Pitt (Wilberforce's good friend) and Charles James Fox, a prominent member of the opposition party in parliament. Thus, the Committee acted in both the political and public sphere to accomplish their goal of the legal prohibition of the British slave trade.

Starting in July of 1787, the Committee began setting up local correspondents and committees that could spread their message quickly throughout the country. At that time, Thomas Clarkson also traveled throughout the country gathering information, witnesses, and documents about the slave trade. They then produced and distributed pamphlets about the atrocities of the slave trade, printed fliers with the picture of a slave kneeling with the words "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" and held lectures all over the country. Clarkson would often speak, offering vivid explanations of the terrifying conditions on slave ships and distributing a detailed drawing of a typical slave vessel. At this time, former slaves Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoana wrote against the evils of slavery. Equiano's book *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vass, the African* written by himself became a bestseller.

In 1788, the Manchester Abolition Committee initiated the first mass petition drive of the movement. The goal of the drive was to put pressure on individual members of parliament. Members of the committee would hold a public meeting to pass the resolution on the petition (this meeting would be announced in newspapers), at which point the petition was circulated to get signatures. The petitions generally centered on the moral issues at stake such as humanity, religion, and justice rather than economic arguments.

Throughout the year, petitions were sent in to parliament, eventually adding up to between 60,000 and 100,000 signatures (the largest petition drive Britain had seen). Additionally, the diversity of participants in the campaign had never been seen before. Anyone from elite merchants to farmers to intellectuals to sailors to religious leaders signed petitions. Women were also very

involved, making up 68 out of the 302 people on the first official list of subscribers to abolition in Manchester. Additionally, in 1788, women in London held their first “ladies only” abolition meeting.

There was also an “anti-saccharite” action under way in which people boycotted sugar from slave plantations in the West Indies. This action was largely aimed at women and youth because they were not able to participate legally in the petition drives. This was not officially part of the committee’s initiatives, but certainly complimented their activities.

In February of 1788, Prime Minister Pitt also pushed the Privy Council (an advising body to the Prime Minister) to start gathering information about the slave trade to present to parliament when Wilberforce would put forth his bill. He did so on May 12, 1789. However, despite the petitions and the Privy Council’s evidence, discussion of the bill was delayed for two years because the House of Lords (a branch of parliament) decided they needed to gather their own evidence. Finally, in April of 1791, the bill was defeated. The London Society of West Indian Planters and Merchants had provided much of the opposition, starting their own counter-petitions in 1789 (though their signatures fell dismally short in number compared to those of the abolitionists) and lobbying the cabinet, House of Lords, and the commons (the other branch of the parliament).

After the 1791 defeat, the abolitionists mobilized again and started a second petition drive that was initiated by the London Abolition Committee in 1792. Clarkson went all across the country distributing materials and garnering support. The committee was careful to distinguish that they were for the abolition of the slave trade, not slavery as a whole (they were not ready to fight that political battle at the time). This time they gathered signatures, but held off sending the petitions in until they could send them all at once. The petition drive yielded 380,000-400,000 signatures.

News coverage of the abolition debate reached a peak in April of 1792. The House of Commons spent much of the month going over the petitions and ended up voting for gradual abolition. However, the House of Lords stalled the bill long enough for the political climate to grow increasingly paranoid about sedition. There was a slave revolt in French Saint Domingue (now Haiti) and the radical Jacobin revolt in France (both in 1791). Though public opinion remained in favor of abolition, committees and organizations around abolition were suspected of sedition. The abolition struggle then shifted to be almost exclusively waged within parliament.

By 1804, fears of radicalism had all but disappeared, so in May of 1804, Wilberforce reintroduced the abolition bill, and it was again delayed in the House of Lords. Clarkson then went on another country-wide tour to garner support and began to mobilize the grassroots networks again. In 1806, Wilberforce presented a partial abolition bill that would bar slave trade with foreign and conquered colonies. The opposition sent out a petition, but Clarkson called for an emergency petition and gathered 5 times as many names as the opposition. In May of 1806, the Foreign Slave Trade Bill passed.

In early 1807, the committee looked into their support in parliament and decided to try for a bill calling for complete abolition. This time there were no opposing petitions. In fact, many members of the opposition admitted feeling pressured by the widespread hatred of the slave trade. The bill was passed in 1807 in both houses.

While the committee had achieved its stated goal, it continued to disseminate information due to a backlash from citizens involved in the slave trade (particularly at the docks in Liverpool). In 1814, the Treaty of Paris allowed for the opening up of the French slave trade with a British sanction. The committee initiated its final petition drive that ended up yielding 1,375,000 signatures (even Liverpool largely contributed). This pushed Prime Minister Castlereagh to renegotiate that part of the Treaty with France. This was also a testament to the incredible networking, message spreading, and grassroots organizing of the Abolition Committee.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Abolition Committee was influenced by the Quaker Meeting on Suffering, as well as the abolitionist Quakers in the Philadelphia area of the United States. (1)

This movement has influenced countless grassroots movements, and is considered by many to be the first modern social movement. (2)

Sources:

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Drescher, Seymour. "Public Opinion and Parliament in the Abolition of the British Slave Trade." The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament and People. Ed. Stephen Farrell, Melanie Unwin and James Walvin. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Hochschild, Adam. Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006.

Additional Notes:

For an excellent look into the political climate of the time, I recommend the movie "Amazing Grace" about the work of William Wilberforce in the abolition movement.

Edited by Max Rennebohm (21/06/2011)

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Hannah Jones, 14/02/2010

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.

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