



The Slave Trade, c. 1830–1893: British Foreign Office Confidential Print

Collection Summary

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In 1808, the UK Parliament passed the Slave Trade Act, which prohibited the Atlantic slave trade throughout the British empire and empowered the government to put pressure on other nations to abolish their own slave trading activities. One of the most notable outcomes of this policy was the formation of the West Africa Squadron, a Royal Navy unit which patrolled the waters off the Atlantic coast of Africa and sought to intercept any ships engaged in the slave trade.

What this unique collection demonstrates is that this was only one aspect of Britain's extensive anti-slavery efforts during this period. Foreign Office documents reveal that there was also a concerted diplomatic endeavour, often backed up with the threat of military intervention, to push other states and rulers—in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas—to curtail and, ultimately, to end the practice of slavery in their domains.

The collection comprises 89 items, many of which are bound volumes in excellent condition, amounting to a total of approximately 31,500 pages. This material is principally correspondence and reports, sent between British diplomats and envoys across the world, and civil servants in the Foreign Office in London. It offers unrivalled insights into British official attitudes towards the slave trade. It likewise sheds light upon the exercise of British imperialism in a period when that power was reaching its zenith. Significantly, the documents in this collection illuminate the confluence, and contradictions, of political strategy, military strength, and moral mission, in the high imperial era. These sources serve as a vital reminder that 1808 did not mark the end of the fight for abolition, but, rather, signalled the beginning of a critically important and much more global chapter in modern history.

This collection will be of interest to historians of slavery, empire, and diplomacy. It will also appeal to those studying political science, economics, religion, and philosophy.

Sources Include:



