

Reading 4: Exchange of Populations: The Slave Trade

At the time of Columbus, Europeans stayed in Europe, Africans in Africa, Indians in India, etc. There was very little sense of race as we know it today. That changed as the slave trade and immigration developed after 1492. Between 1492 and 1820, about 10-15 million Africans were brought against their will to the Americas. About two million Europeans came during that time, most of them poor people who sold themselves to work for a period of time or criminals deported to work off their sentences.

Columbus did not go looking for slaves. He wanted gold. When he was welcomed with food and gifts by the friendly Arawak, he wrote

They ...willingly traded everything they owned... . They were well-built, with good bodies and handsome features.... They do not bear arms, and do not know them, ... They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane... . They would make fine servants.... With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.

What he wanted most from them was gold, and when they couldn't give him as much as he wanted because they did not have a good supply, he decided to bring them back to Spain as galley slaves. He brought about 500 Taino people, of whom three hundred survived the trip.

Slavery had existed for thousands of years. Slaves were usually conquered people or people of different religions. Christians were barred from enslaving other Christians (similarly, Muslims were not to enslave Muslims). Most of the slaves in Europe at this time were Arabic-speaking Muslims from North Africa, Russia, and Eastern Europe. (In fact, the word "slave" comes from "Slav," or Eastern European.) Queen Isabella was upset that people who should have been converted to Christianity were being captured as slaves. She stopped the trade, although the Spanish and later the Portuguese found ways to enslave the indigenous population on site.

Slavery in Europe gradually died out, but the Portuguese discovered that they could buy African slaves cheaply without having to go to war. And with the rich possibilities opening up in the newly conquered lands, the need for forced labor increased. People from Africa knew how to farm in tropical conditions and to herd cattle, which the conquerors had brought.

Columbus saw that growing conditions were good for sugar cane and brought some with him to what would become Haiti on one of his voyages. Sugar cane was grown on large plantations and required lots of workers. The way was set for Africans to be brought to work on these plantations. Later, they would be brought to work on coffee and tobacco plantations, for the land was rich, and these crops grew well. It is believed that an enslaved African (known as Juan Garrido) traveling with Hernando Cortes, who would conquer Mexico, planted the first wheat in the Americas.

Sources:

http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=2&psid=3569

<http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/zinncol1.html>