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How the abolitionists won

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It was 175 years ago today that Britain became the world's first major power to abolish slavery. On Aug. 1, 1838, the Empire officially freed its 800,000 African slaves, who had been re-designated as "apprentices" four years earlier by the Slavery Abolition Act.

Abolitionists had fought for more than 50 years to reach this goal, facing odds which, in the 1780s, looked insurmountable.

When the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was formed in 1787, public opinion overwhelmingly accepted slavery as normal, natural, and legitimate. Slavery of various kinds had been the norm throughout human history, from the Roman Empire to the Aztecs and Incas; from prisoners taken in African and North American tribal wars to serfdom in Russia.

Slavery in the West Indies provided Europeans with affordable sugar, coffee, tobacco, rice and rum. The slave trade and its secondary industries (shipbuilding, for instance) employed thousands, and generated millions in tax revenues for grateful governments. Europeans enjoyed these products without thinking too much about their cruel and bloody origins.

In addition to the hurdles of public opinion and of fighting a profitable industry, another obstacle facing British abolitionists was the predominance in their ranks of an unpopular religious minority. Quakers were pacifist egalitarian democrats who refused military service, and refused to pay taxes or tithes to the Church of England. They wore plain clothes made of un-dyed wool. They rejected music,

novels and the use of tombstones. Unless praying or preaching, Quakers refused to remove their peculiar broad-brimmed high-crowned hats, even in the presence of royalty. They would not address anyone as "my Lord" (God alone being Lord).

Although Quakers were no longer being actively persecuted or killed in the 1780s, they were still excluded from power (only Church of England adherents could be Members of Parliament), influence, and respectability. Few cared about what they had to say.

How did a movement dominated by unpopular religious minorities (Quakers were later joined by evangelical Anglicans like William Wilberforce) succeed in persuading Parliament to end a popular industry that brought so much pleasure and prosperity to so many people?

By exposing the horrors of the slave trade, and this by using visual images in addition to the printed word. A diagram of the slave ship *Brookes* showed MPs, and the general public, how hundreds of Africans were chained side-by-side at the bottom of the ship, in a space only two feet and eight inches high. Africans sold to the British by other Africans were forced to lie in their own urine, feces and vomit for many weeks before reaching the West Indies. Sick slaves were thrown overboard. In 1782, the slave ship *Zong* threw 130 slaves overboard, and ensuing litigation was concerned uniquely with the legal question as to whether the insurance company was required to cover this loss of "property." Those who survived the journey across the Atlantic were branded with a hot iron, sold and then compelled to spend the

rest of their lives growing and harvesting sugar cane and other crops. Labour was compelled by whips, and disobedience punished by various methods of torture. Slaves who dared to revolt were burned alive.

In addition to using visual images that were simply unanswerable, the abolitionists succeeded because they were incrementalists. While wanting to abolish slavery itself, their initial efforts were centered exclusively on abolishing the slave trade. They picked a winnable issue, and rejected the absolutist argument that abolishing the slave trade would constitute an unholy "compromise". Two decades of political activism, lobbying and public education paid off when Parliament abolished the slave trade in 1807. Only then did the abolitionists commence the next phase of their difficult struggle to abolish slavery itself.

Starting with a small group of determined men who met at a print shop in London on May 22, 1787, to begin the campaign against the slave trade, the abolitionist movement is an example of how evil can only be overcome by determination, perseverance, hard work and sacrifice. This movement also demonstrates the truth of a popular saying: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

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