British abolitionist agitation first stirred in the 1770s; became an organized movement in the 1780s; achieved the banning of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807; successfully campaigned for slave emancipation in the 1830s; and encouraged official and unofficial abolitionist activity in Africa and the Americas both before and after those years. The suppression of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807 has occupied a privileged place in this chronology, partly because Britain had previously been the largest slave carrier, and partly because such action on the part of Britain as the leading naval power was bound to have large international significance.

The British were not the first to ban the slave trade. The Danish government had decreed already in 1792 that, in ten years time, its slave trade would end. However, this move was itself partly a by-product of British abolitionist representations, which had surged in the years 1788–92. The Danish slave trade was a modest affair, and the decision to ban it an anticipation of action that the British seemed poised to take. The British Act of 1807 was also preceded by much earlier bans on slave imports by the rebellious colonies of North America, culminating in a joint ban in 1775 by the Continental Congress. The prohibition of slave imports by the North Americans was, like other trade boycotts, taken mainly as a sanction against the imperial metropolis rather than as an anti-slavery measure. Eventually the United States banned the Atlantic slave trade, at almost exactly the same time as Britain did. But, once again, no attempt was made to give the action a specifically abolitionist significance. British politicians and abolitionists hailed the suppression of the Atlantic slave traffic as a measure which would promote an amelioration in the condition of the slaves, paving the way, many thought, to an eventual ending of the slave regime.

The British anti-slavery movement was initiated by Granville Sharp, who had first focused on securing a judgment from the High Court that the holding of slaves in England was illegal – the celebrated Mansfield judgment of 1772. Critiques of slavery and the slave trade by Anthony...
Benezet and other American Quakers, as well as by George Wallace, John Wesley, and Thomas Clarkson helped to stimulate a mass petition campaign against the Atlantic slave trade in the late 1780s. Without denying the important anti-slavery impulses elsewhere in the Atlantic world, especially in the early American republic, British abolitionism of this period was the first public and civic campaign against a trade which fed the slave systems of the New World, and whose ending by a major power would plausibly weaken them.¹

As is known, the campaign was blocked in the 1790s, and the first major blow against New World slavery was struck by the slave uprising in 1791, in the rich French colony of Saint Domingue. A generalized slave emancipation was decreed by the French Revolutionary Convention in 1794. Toussaint Louverture and those who were seen as “black Jacobins” built up sufficient strength to defeat not only a British attempt to shore up slavery in the colony, but even a large expedition sent by Napoleon bent on restoring slavery. These dramatic attempts encouraged a re-birth of abolitionist agitation in Britain, and should be seen as contributing both to slave trade abolition in 1807 and to the eventual re-launching of public abolitionist agitation – this time against slavery itself in the British colonies – in 1823.²

The true proportions of the British abolition of 1807 can be appreciated only when it is seen as part of an interconnected sequence. Slavery in the Americas was suppressed in one territory after another, in events extending over a little more than a century from the 1770s to the late 1880s. At the beginning of this period, slavery was legal and seemingly unassailable in all European New World colonies. Indeed, the institution of slavery was not questioned by anyone who seemed to matter until the 1770s. Slavery was an ancient institution, and slave produce made a huge contribution to the commerce and revenues of the European empires in the New World. But the Haitian Revolution of 1804 and the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807 were followed by an international agreement denouncing the traffic issued by the Great Powers assembled at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

Slave trade bans and other moderate abolitionist measures accompanied the Spanish American independence struggles in the years 1811 to 1825. Slaves who fought in the liberation armies were offered

¹ For interesting new light on British abolitionism see Hochschild, Breaking the Chains; Brown, Moral Capital.
² See Blackburn, “Haiti.”