

Atlantic Slavery and Its Repercussions in German-Speaking Territories, c. 1650–1850



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Introduction

Notions of German exceptionalism long perpetuated the assumption that early modern Germany had no significant connection to Atlantic slavery. According to this view neither did slavery as an institution exist in the various territories of early modern Germany, nor were German states or actors significantly involved in transatlantic and race-based slavery. The well-documented activities of the Brandenburg Africa Company, a company devoted to slave trade around the turn of the eighteenth century, appeared as an outlier in this regard. With a stronger focus on enslavement practices as well as discourses in studies both on the Black

presence and on economic activities, this assumption is no longer valid. Nevertheless, studies on the institution of slavery in early modern Germany have only just begun to emerge.

Current scholarship in the field builds on three research traditions. First, it builds on writings about African and Asian people at noble courts, including captives from the Ottoman wars. Pertinent twentieth-century regional studies have been assembled in more comprehensive works from the 1990s onward, raising questions of enslavement, integration, and prolonged dependency. Secondly, economic historians have of late emphasised that transoceanic German merchant networks frequently entailed merchants' economic involvement in and profits from slavery. Thanks to mass data collections, researchers were furthermore able to estimate the degree of German transatlantic slave trade involvement. Lastly, studies on the perception of and on legal discourses around slavery and people of African descent have now moved beyond the notion of proxy discussions, pointing to vigorous legal, activist, and institutional traditions around slavery in the German territories.

Selected Literature

Studies on Africans and people of African descent in German-speaking territories have long interrogated questions of enslavement and its consequences. Compiling numerous regional studies, **Peter Martin**'s 1993 work on the Black presence provided an important and wide-reaching, albeit somewhat unsystematic foundation for further scholarship. Martin argued that early modern Black court employees, the best-researched group of Black persons in early modern Germany, had lived in a legal grey area between freedom and unfreedom, an idea that **Vera Lind** (2004) expanded upon with her concept of "privileged dependency." While Lind assumed the existence of only a very small number of Black court employees, **Anne Kuhlmann-Smirnov** (2013) found not only 380 such persons but was also able to trace aristocratic recruitment patterns, showing clear links to Atlantic slavery-based economies.

Economic links along with ideological ties to Atlantic slavery extending far beyond noble courts and into a German "slavery hinterland" were also highlighted in **Felix Brahm and Eve Rosenhaft**'s edited volume (2016). In a similar vein, contributors to the special issue edited by **Doris Bulach and Juliane Schiel** (2015) pointed to strong economic connections and to German merchants', companies', and ship owners' direct involvement in the slave trade. Along with **Andrea Weindl**'s (2008) data-based assessment of slave trading activities from Northern Germany, the issue was crucial in dispelling the idea of German restraint in enslavement practices in the early modern period.

Recently, **Magnus Ressel** (2016) has called attention to the influence of reports on European captivity in Northern Africa and ideas of Ottoman despotism on discourses around Atlantic slavery. **Rebekka von Mallinckrodt** (2017) was able to identify an influential eighteenth-century German legal tradition that acknowledged the existence of slavery on German soil – to the detriment of enslaved Black people in Germany. At the opposite end of the spectrum, substantial abolitionist initiatives in German-speaking territories have become evident. Such activism was sometimes influenced by encounters with people of African descent, as **Sarah Lentz** (2020) has pointed out. The recent volume edited by **Mallinckrodt, Lentz, and Josef Köstlbauer** (2021) explores the presence of enslaved people in Germany as well as issues of ideological entanglements with slavery. Contributions address, among other topics, missionary activities, recruitment patterns, as well as individual negotiations of freedom and dependency.

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