

Abolition and its Swiss echoes

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The movement for the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery, which began in England in the 1780s and achieved the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 and of slavery in the British colonies in 1833, found echoes in Switzerland. Swiss intellectuals and religious leaders, among them members of the Pietist circles of Basel, supported the abolitionist cause. The Basel Mission, which Chapter V examines, was founded in part in the spirit of the evangelical revival that inspired the British abolitionists.¹

Switzerland had no colonies and therefore no colonial slavery to abolish, and the Swiss debate on slavery was limited. Swiss merchants and investors continued to participate in the colonial economy after the abolition of the slave trade by the European powers. Some continued to profit from slavery where it remained legal, in the United States until 1865, in Cuba until 1886 and in Brazil until 1888. The debate of 1864 in the federal parliament showed that the Swiss authorities were reluctant to interfere with the economic activities of Swiss citizens abroad, even when these involved slavery.

This reluctance has a modern parallel. The Swiss authorities have long been reluctant to regulate the activities of Swiss companies abroad, on the grounds of the sovereignty of the host countries and the competitiveness of Swiss business. The debate on the Responsible Business Initiative, which is examined at the end of this chapter, showed that this reluctance remains strong, although it is increasingly contested.

1 Notes

1. On the reception of the abolitionist movement in Switzerland, including in Basel Pietist circles and in connection with the Basel Mission, see HLS, article "Sklaverei"; the literature on Swiss abolitionism. To be verified. ↩

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