

Amistad: Some historical considerations

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Amistad, the film directed by Steven Spielberg, places before a large audience a glimpse of the brutality of the African slave trade. For four centuries the traffic in human cargo transported tens of millions of people from the coast of Africa to the Americas to labor in diamond mines and sugar cane, tobacco and cotton fields.

For two years, from 1839 to 1841, the Amistad incident was a central event in American political life. It is to Spielberg's credit that the revolt and the name Cinque, leader of the rebellion, are no longer known only to a very small segment of the public.

Spielberg's film points to two important aspects of the slave trade: First, the economic relationships between the African kings, the slave traders, the plantation owners and the merchants, all of whom profited from the commerce in human property known as "black gold"; and, second, the forces involved in the struggle against it.

The film has many weaknesses, some of which are discussed in the accompanying article. This comment, however, is primarily concerned with the significance of the Amistad revolt and its impact on political relations within the United States and internationally.

The arrival of the Amistad on US shores on August 25, 1839 was an event of worldwide importance. As the general public was later to learn, fifty-three Africans, after having been transported illegally across the Atlantic on a slave ship called the Tecora, were purchased in Cuba by two sugar plantation owners. While in transit aboard the Amistad to a plantation in another part of Cuba, the slaves revolted.

Sengbe Pieh (called Cinque by the Spanish) was able to free himself from his chains and gain control of the ship. During the struggle the ship's cook and captain were killed while the lives of the two plantation owners, Don Jose Ruiz and Don Pedro Montez, were spared so that they could help steer the ship back to Africa. By day, the Africans directed the craft east; by night, the two Spaniards headed it back toward Cuba. As a result, after a two-month journey, the vessel ended up in the waters off Connecticut and was brought into Culloden Point on the eastern tip of Long Island by a US naval ship. The slaves were then taken into custody and charged with piracy and murder.

In a revealing scene in the film, no less than three different claims are filed for possession of the Africans at a circuit court hearing held to determine the fate of the captives. And for good reason. For the fifty-three human beings on board the Amistad, Ruiz and Montez had paid a total of forty thousand dollars, a vast sum in 1839.

Spielberg's film is useful in depicting some of these economic facts of life of the slave trade, but the director's idealization of

Cinque might lead the viewer to conclude that the Amistad revolt was an isolated incident, explained entirely by the heroism of one individual. This would be erroneous.

The rebellion took place at a time when opposition to slavery, both from the abolitionist movement and from slaves themselves, had reached new heights. In 1831 William Lloyd Garrison founded the Liberator, the first consistent voice of the anti-slavery movement. Two years later, Lewis and Arthur Tappan, Garrison and others founded the American Anti-Slavery Society. Pro-slavery forces struck back. Their supporters in Congress passed the infamous "gag rule," banning consideration of antislavery petitions. Elijah Lovejoy, an abolitionist editor in Illinois, was murdered by a mob in 1837.

On the political front, the nullification controversy of 1832-33 pitted South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun against President Andrew Jackson and supporters of a strong central government. Calhoun, a leading ideologue of slavery, asserted that individual states had the right to render federal laws null and void.

The nullifiers threatened to secede if the federal government "trampled" on their rights. Increasingly slaves were taking up arms against their bondage. In 1791 Toussaint l'Ouverture, inspired by the great French Revolution of 1789, led a slave revolt in Santo Domingo (Haiti). Ex-slave Denmark Vesey, inspired by the Haitian revolt, prepared for an armed attack on Charleston in 1821-22. The famous Nat Turner rebellion in the United States took place in 1831, the same year that a major slave uprising, bloodily suppressed by the British, erupted in Jamaica. By the time of the Amistad incident revolts were regularly taking place on board slave ships in African waters.

By 1839 the Atlantic slave trade had been outlawed. Slavery was now legal only in Cuba, a Spanish colony, and in the southern half of the United States.

The arrival of the Amistad on American shores on August 27 created a storm of controversy. Commentaries appeared in the Northern and European press, while every effort, for obvious reasons, was made to keep it out of the Southern newspapers. On September 2 a play entitled "The Long, Low Black Schooner," purporting to be based on the revolt, opened in New York City and played to packed audiences.

The abolitionist movement, recognizing the significance of this development for the struggle against slavery in the US, formed the "Amistad Committee" on September 4 to raise money and provide support to the Africans in jail.

The Spanish government responded by demanding that the American government immediately extradite the slaves to Cuba to face charges of mutiny and murder.

A great deal, morally and politically, rode on the fate of the Amistad captives: were they to be returned to their alleged “owners” or released and escorted back to their homes in Africa?

A significant weakness of the film, from the historical point of view, is its portrayal of the abolitionist movement. In writing a script for a film it is certainly permissible to introduce changes for the purpose of emphasis. But why Spielberg has chosen to depict the anti-slavery forces, for the most part, as fanatical and Bible-thumping buffoons is something of a mystery. Moreover, adding a fictional character—Joadson, a black abolitionist played by Morgan Freeman—only serves to obscure or diminish the role played by historical figures, such as Lewis Tappan, portrayed as Joadson’s associate, who led the opposition to slavery. Tappan, an abolitionist and silk merchant, played a principal role in organizing public meetings and raising funds to defend the imprisoned Africans.

University professor Josiah Gibbs, an opponent of slavery and one of those presented in a foolish light by the film, was able to find two Mende translators on the New York docks who made it possible for Cinque and the other Africans to testify in court. The testimony of the captives revealed that they were not Cuban-born slaves, and therefore subjects of the Spanish government, but had been transported illegally across the Atlantic.

Three of the captives, Cinque, Grabbeau and Fuliwa, described in district court how they had become slaves. They explained that men were often seized by other tribes for outstanding debts or taken prisoner in attacks on villages. Black slave traders would then transport their victims to sites on the coast where they were held before making the brutal Middle Passage.

The slaves on the Amistad, from eleven different tribes, had been held in the Lomboko fortress in Sierra Leone before making the trans-Atlantic trip. Cinque and the others physically demonstrated in court how they had been shackled aboard ship. For two months the Africans were kept in inhuman conditions until they reached Cuba. Those who survived the journey were then bathed and fattened up before being sold in the Havana slave market.

The case for the captives in district court was argued by attorney Roger Baldwin, grandson of an American revolutionary who signed the Declaration of Independence and a supporter of the anti-slavery cause. District Judge Judson ruled in favor of the Africans, ordering their return to Africa.

President Martin Van Buren, at the behest of Southern slave interests as well as the Spanish government, appealed the ruling and the case eventually reached the Supreme Court.

Former US President John Quincy Adams (1767-1848), by this time a Congressman, had closely followed the Amistad case. In the House of Representatives he accused Van Buren of working with the Spanish monarchy to have the captives returned to Cuba, where they would face certain death.

When the case came before the Supreme Court Adams agreed to participate as legal counsel with Baldwin. Nicknamed “Old Man Eloquent,” the 73-year-old Adams passionately argued for the rights of the Africans, including their right to rebel.

Evoking the ideals of the American Revolution, many of whose participants were still alive, he thoroughly discredited Van Buren’s collaboration with the Spanish monarchy. He made a

powerful argument that if the judges ruled in favor of the Spanish crown they would be repudiating the democratic ideals on the basis of which the American republican form of government had been formed.

In the course of his argument Adams quoted an article published in a journal of the day, “by one of the brightest intellects of the South,” that defended slavery as resulting “from the natural state of man, which is war.”

In reply, Adams declared, “There is the principle, on which a particular decision is demanded from this court ... on behalf of the southern states. Is that a principle recognized by this Court? Is it the principle of that DECLARATION? [Here Mr. Adams pointed to the Declaration of Independence, two copies of which hang before the eyes of the Judges on the bench.] ... Is that the principle on which these United States stand before the world? That DECLARATION says that every man is `endowed by his Creator with certain inalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’

“If these rights are inalienable, they are incompatible with the rights of the victor to take the life of his enemy in war, or to spare his life and make him a slave. ... The moment you come to the Declaration of Independence, that every man has a right to life and liberty, an inalienable right, this case is decided. I ask nothing more in behalf of these unfortunate men, than this Declaration.”

Adams and Baldwin had established conclusively that the Africans had been illegally transported to Cuba. The Supreme Court justices, seven of whom were Southerners, had little choice but to free the rebels. Ruling in favor of the Africans, in any event, did not have a direct bearing on the continued existence of slavery in the US.

A study of the Amistad affair and this entire epoch in American history, the period leading up to the outbreak of the Civil War, is critical. Spielberg’s film, insofar as it encourages such a study, is useful. The film can not, however, be a substitute for serious study of historical developments.

For those who are interested, the full text of John Quincy Adams’ speech is available on the World Wide Web. In preparing this article the author found very useful material at www.mysticseaport.org. It contains information on the slave trade and a copy of John Barber’s detailed report on the Amistad incident, written in 1839.

See Also:

Amistad’s failings



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