American History I – Exploration and Conquest – Impact on the Americas

Use the source below to help identify impacts on the Americas as a result of exploration. Respond to the questions on your own paper, using a header to identify the source. You will use the information gathered to synthesize responses for the homework assignment.

Essay: The Discovery of the Americas and the Transatlantic Slave Trade by Ira Berlin

In the middle of the fifteenth century, Europe, Africa, and the Americas came together, creating—among other things—a new economy. At the center of that economy was the plantation, an enterprise dedicated to the production of exotic commodities—the most prominent being sugar—for a distant market. The sugar plantation, which first developed in the Mediterranean, was an enormously complex unit of production requiring the mobilization of vast amounts of capital, the development of new technologies (agricultural, industrial, and maritime), the invention of management techniques, and—because sugar production was extraordinarily labor intensive—the employment of huge numbers of workers. Because sugar was also a most lucrative commodity, plantation entrepreneurs drew capital from all corners of the Mediterranean and Europe, from as far away as Germany and the Netherlands. They also developed new technologies to grow, manufacture, and transport sugar great distances. But perhaps the most difficult problem these businessmen faced was securing the labor to sustain the vast economic enterprise they were creating.

Few people wanted to work on a sugar plantation. In the fifteenth century, most men and women labored to gain a competency—a livelihood—for themselves and their families. Free workers also disdained sugar plantations, appreciating that the labor was brutal and dangerous—literally killing. Sugar entrepreneurs turned to enslaved labor, an ancient form familiar to all in the fifteenth-century Mediterranean, although rarely employed on a massive scale.

At first, the sugar entrepreneurs enslaved any men and women they could buy or capture. Christian and Muslim, European and African slaves worked side-by-side on the sugar estates. For reasons of propinquity, Slavic people taken from the Black Sea composed the majority of the enslaved population—hence the word “slave.” Africans loomed even larger in the slave population when the Portuguese carried the sugar enterprise onto newly discovered Atlantic islands. On these islands, plantations were even larger and required even more labor. Portuguese planters, often backed by Italian bankers, began raiding along the west coast of Africa, seizing Africans and carrying them back to Lisbon, where they were sold to locals, sent to the Atlantic islands, or re-exported to other parts of Europe.

The Portuguese found slave raiding lucrative, but it was also dangerous. Africans resisted, counterattacking with punishing blows. Eventually, they forced the Portuguese to turn from unabashed kidnapping to trade, which proved more efficient, more profitable, and safer.

In Africa, native merchants were more than willing to sell slaves to European outsiders, but they did not sell their own people; rather they sold men and women of nations other than their own, usually men captured in war or guilty of some heinous offense. They also sold them on their terms. They kept the Portuguese and other Europeans who entered the trade at a distance, never allowing them onto African soil without permission, which generally had to be purchased by paying a tax of some sort. African merchants drove hard bargains with European traders, giving as good as they got. Responsibility for the slave trade rested with both Europeans and Africans.

The exchange of European goods for enslaved Africans that began in the middle of the fifteenth century set the terms of the slave trade for the next four hundred years, but the character of that trade was constantly changing for both traders and slaves. The number of slaves grew; their nationality, sex, and age fluctuated. New maritime technology changed the transport that carried slaves, which, in turn, affected everything from the price of slaves to the slaves’ mortality and morbidity. And while the trade expanded enormously, reaching deep into the African interior and to all parts of the Americas, it also created opposition among Africans, Europeans, and the Americas, which eventually led to the slave trade’s final demise during the middle years of the nineteenth century.

Although the nature of the slave trade constantly changed, one thing remained the same. The trade was a violent, deadly business that killed millions, mutilated millions, and traumatized millions. Enslaved Africans everywhere endured the trauma of enslavement. Although the initial deportees may have been drawn from wartime prisoners, by the eighteenth century enslaved peoples were rarely guilty of anything more than being in the wrong place at the wrong time, taken by mercenary armies, bandits, and professional slavers.

Most captives faced the nightmare transatlantic crossing, the dreaded Middle Passage. The depths of human misery and the astounding death toll of men and women packed in the stinking hulls shamed the most hard hearted. Slave traders themselves admitted the deleterious effects of the trade. Even among those who defended slavery, there were those who condemned the
Middle Passage as an abomination. But, like all human experiences—even the worst—the Middle Passage was not of one piece. While the vast majority suffered below deck, a few men and women chosen from among the captives helped set the sails, steer the ships, and serve the crews that carried the mass of Africans across the Atlantic. Surviving the Middle Passage was but the first of the many tests faced by the forced immigrants. They would now have to make their way in perhaps the most difficult situations human beings have ever faced.

Analysis Questions

1. Describe the evolution of the slave trade as outlined in the essay.
2. Why were African slaves needed in the Americas?
3. In what way can we consider this triangular trade America’s “original sin?”