

The Transatlantic Slave Trade

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The Transatlantic Slave Trade, the trafficking and forced migration of millions of men, women and children from Africa to the American continent, Europe and beyond, could be said to be one of the great crimes which ushers in the modern world. The commemorative events that were held in 2007 to mark the 200th anniversary of the Parliamentary abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade may have gone some way to highlight Britain's involvement with slavery, and the fact that it was the enslavement of Africans that created many of the economic conditions for the industrial revolution and Britain's emergence as a major world power.

In the 18th century, when the trafficking of Africans was at its height, Britain was the world's leading slave trader. It is estimated that some 3.5 million Africans were transported across the Atlantic in British ships in that period. However, as the life histories of Olaudah Equiano and others show, there were thousands of slaves in London and in towns and cities throughout Britain. This was certainly the case in the centuries before 1807; Mary Prince being just one example of the many enslaved Africans held in London after 1807. In Britain's colonies in Africa, slaves were still to be found in some areas right up to the first decades of the 20th century.

Slavery, essentially the ownership of one human being by another, has existed for thousands of years in human history and examples can be found in all continents. European slaves were to be found in ancient Egypt, and Europeans enslaved and exported each other throughout the Middle Ages. The trafficking of enslaved Africans also existed for many centuries before the Portuguese began their voyages of exploration and the first kidnapping raids in West Africa in the mid-15th century. After the European discovery of the American continent at the end of the 15th century there was a great increase in the demand for forced labour for mining and the development of agriculture, which Europe could not meet. The genocide of the American population forced Europe to turn to Africa. From around 1500 enslaved Africans were being taken via Europe to the Caribbean, and by the 1520s, African slaves were taken from Africa directly across the Atlantic. Enslaved Africans became so important for Spain's American colonies that the Spanish king officially licensed the slave trade and by 1592 required some 40,000 Africans to be delivered annually to Spain's colonies.

The great profits to be made from this trade in human flesh led to the involvement of slave traffickers from all the other countries of western Europe. There was soon competition to acquire the *asiento* or licence to supply enslaved Africans to Spain's

colonies as well as elsewhere in the New World. The first English trafficker was John Hawkins, who acted as the agent of Queen Elizabeth I. From her reign until that of Queen Victoria, all England's monarchs were involved in the slave trade. Britain finally acquired the *asiento* in 1713 and by the end of the 18th century Britain's Prime Minister, William Pitt declared that 80% of the country's entire foreign trade was connected with African slavery.

From the late 15th to the late 19th centuries some 15 million Africans were removed from their homelands and transported across the Atlantic, many millions were killed in the course of being kidnapped. The enormity of the Transatlantic Slave Trade meant that it could not occur without the involvement of African rulers and merchants. Before the 19th century Europeans were not militarily powerful enough to invade African kingdoms and kidnap millions of people. Equiano's autobiography describes the impact that the Transatlantic Slave Trade had on his own society, as well as the nature of his capture and enslavement, and the fact that he passed through several owners before he reached the coast. Amongst other things his book shows some of the differences between slavery in Africa and the fate that awaited him and millions of others in the American continent.

The slave trade is sometimes known as the triangular trade to show that it was three-sided and linked Europe, Africa and America in an economic and political relationship, that has not entirely ended. Manufactured goods from Europe were shipped to West Africa and exchanged for enslaved Africans; Africans were then transported across the Atlantic in the so-called Middle Passage. Then slave produce, such as sugar, cotton, and tobacco was shipped back to Europe from the American colonies. One of the most vivid and poignant parts of Equiano's book is his description of the 'middle passage', the voyage in the hold of the slave ship, often lasting several months. It is estimated that some 20% of those transported died during these voyages and Equiano describes both the appalling conditions and the acts of desperate resistance that Africans still waged during these voyages.

African resistance to slavery is too often forgotten, although it is one of the central themes in the accounts of Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince and the writers of other slave narratives. The earliest slave rebellions in the Caribbean occurred in the early 16th century, while the first Africans taken to North America are said to have immediately rebelled and run away. The most famous and significant resistance occurred during the revolution in the French colony of St Domingue in 1791. There, enslaved Africans rose up and, led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, then defeated the armies of France, Spain, and Britain before declaring the independence of Haiti in 1804. Today August 23, the date of the start of the revolution is commemorated as International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition. In Britain too, Africans played a major role in opposition to slavery and the slave trade. In the 18th century many enslaved Africans

liberated themselves by running away and demanding wages. Others, such as Equiano, organised themselves and played a significant role in the abolitionist movement, one of the biggest political movements in Britain's history, which emerged in the late 18th century.

Both Equiano and Mary Prince write in great detail about the slaves of enslaved people in the Caribbean. Slavery was an institution based on violence. Human beings were treated as animals to be auctioned, bred and worked to death as their owners saw fit. Parents were routinely separated from children and female slaves in particular, as Mary Prince relates, were subject to sexual abuse and rape. Torture was commonplace and slave owners sometimes demanded that slaves abuse and torture each other. As Equiano and Mary Prince showed, slavery was an institution that corrupted an entire society. One of its most lasting legacies is the development of modern racism, which in order to justify their enslavement, portrayed Africans as uncivilised, inferior and even barely human.

The motive for the enslavement of Africans for many centuries was economic profit and it is impossible to think of the development of capitalism in Europe and America without slavery and the slave trade. In Britain major cities such as Liverpool and London developed as a result of slavery and the slave trade. It contributed to the development of banking and insurance and much of Britain's manufacturing industry. Today it is difficult to find a stately home or major cultural or financial institution that is not connected with slavery. The slave trade also established an enslaving relationship between Africa and Europe which has still not been ended. Most importantly the slave trade created an African diaspora, a population of millions of people of African descent in the Caribbean, North, Central and South America, and in Europe too.