The Transatlantic Slave Trade

**Pre-Columbian slave trade (pre-sixteenth century CE)**

Upon colonizing the New World, the Europeans ushered in fundamental changes in the political, social, economic, and cultural makeup of the Americas. Many of these changes had consequences that crossed oceans to impact the lives and livelihoods of people worldwide. One of the most glaring examples of this was the drastic effect of the enslavement of humans from Africa. Many scholars today call this an African holocaust and a crime against humanity, without exaggeration. It is typically known under the name "the transatlantic slave trade".

Slaving and slave trading in world history dates back to some of the earliest organized states and agrarian societies. The Athenians had slavery, as did the Romans, the Assyrians, and early states in China and India. Just as in Europe and Asia, slavery existed in some parts of Africa prior to the involvement of Europeans. In some African societies, slave trading was a historical reality, whether based in warfare, debt, religious obligation, or punishment for crimes. Under this system, slaves were not considered property as they later would be under the transatlantic system. These earlier forms of slavery in Africa saw slaves more like a social class or designation within society. It was often possible for the enslaved to escape slave states and integrate into new communities. Sometimes, this happened over multiple generations, as children of the enslaved were considered to be free. On other occasions, it was actually possible for an enslaved person to gain their freedom and be considered a free member of the society within which he or she was enslaved. Therefore, these newly freed people were no longer enslaved and could integrate into a new community.

In the Muslim world of the Middle Ages, the importation of slaves from Africa became commonplace. Prior to the sixteenth century, slaves were largely traded from East Africa and across the Sahara to the Middle East. In this system there were twice as many female slaves as men, while that ratio would be reversed in the Americas. This is largely because the slaves of the Muslim world weren't destined to be used as laborers nor viewed as property. Instead, these people were seen as symbols of status and employed as sexual slaves in harems, and as servants in households and armies. On occasion, some slaves rose to prominence in Muslim empires. It should not be overlooked that the sexual enslavement of women existed for thousands of years before Europe got involved in the slave trade. Nevertheless, many historians argue that the transatlantic slave trade differed from these earlier systems in both its scale, purpose, and the extent of its violence.

**Origins and overview of the transatlantic slave trade (sixteenth to nineteenth century CE)**

How was the transatlantic slave trade different from earlier forms of slavery? How and why did it come about? What did it mean for the lives of those enslaved? What were the consequences for Africa, Europe, and the Americas? All these questions deserve deep consideration, but it's important to understand this article is merely an overview. Slavery is one of the most devastating things that one group of humans can subject another group to, and it is an extremely complex topic. The arrival of Europeans in the Americas caused major changes in the social, political, cultural, demographic, economic, and environmental aspects of the Western Hemisphere. The needs and desires of elites determined how land and laborers in the New World were exploited. Though on a different continent, the goal was to support the economic growth of European communities. The shift to plantation agriculture in Brazil and the Caribbean meant that sugar could now be produced and exported on a large scale. This created a demand for labor. Spaniards and Portuguese did not want to work in the fields; they wanted to own the fields. European diseases had wiped out indigenous populations, and conversion to Christianity made some indigenous peoples exempt from certain types of forced labor. As a result, Europeans looked to Africa for a new source of workers. Africans were deemed suitable for work in the Americas because they were unfamiliar with the land and so less likely to escape, largely resistant to European diseases, accustomed to laboring in the tropics, and came from farming cultures. Scholars still debate how much race had to do with Europeans' initial decision to enslave Africans. Certainly, at the height of the slave trade and in the centuries that followed, the notion of racial inferiority was used by Europeans to justify the enslavement of millions of Africans. Other justifications included religion and concepts of "civilization". To the English, for example, pagan people were candidates for enslavement. They argued that the absence of Christian belief and behavior made people inferior and that they lacked the capacity to be "civilized".

The Atlantic slave trade began shortly after the arrival of the Spanish and Portuguese in the Americas. The transatlantic leg of the African slave trade most likely began with a Portuguese slaving voyage from Africa to the Americas in 1526. The earliest efforts were copied and accelerated by later Portuguese, British, French, and Dutch voyages. All told, approximately 12.5 million Africans were taken from the coast of Africa to the Americas, though about 2.5 million of those died during the voyage. The sheer volume and violence of the trade sets it apart from the types of slavery that existed earlier in history.

Complex links between networks of slave traders in Africa trying to meet Europe's demand led many of those 12.5 million humans being forcibly taken from Africa. But there were other Africans who were forced into bondage through war and societal collapse. The violence of the trade was undeniable, as slavers from the coasts journeyed inland and used their military advantage to prey upon smaller agricultural societies and their populations. It is true that many of those doing the enslaving were themselves Africans. However, European demand and economic muscle clearly drove the trade and maximized its volume. Europe had the demand, the traders on Africa's coasts had the supply, so slavery became a major business. As slave traders provided more enslaved people to European colonies in the Americas, many communities in Africa simply collapsed. Africans and Europeans both cited factors such as economics, religion, and race and ethnic divisions to justify the enslavement of millions of people based upon factors such as economics, religion, and racial and ethnic divisions.

African elites engaged their armies in warfare with neighboring peoples. While this kind of thing happened in other parts of the world, the European demand for slave labor significantly increased warfare within Africa. For example, when the Oyo Empire of West Africa defeated their rivals in southern Yoruba states, they profited from the spoils of that victory by selling their captives into slavery. The political victory became a rewarding economic one as well, a kind of bonus thanks to the slave trade. The Oyo would not have considered this selling their "own" into perpetual (unending) torture and enslavement, for the Yoruba had been their enemy. In return for supplying slaves, African elites were paid with a variety of manufactured products including guns, cotton textiles, glass, and food products made from the very sugar grown by slaves in the Americas. This had a drastic economic and political impact in Africa, which drove so many to participate in the trade. From the European point of view, slave labor was crucial for economic production and increasing wealth. The expansion of plantation agriculture from Brazil into the Caribbean drove the expansion of the slave trade. By the end of the trade in the nineteenth century, more than eight out of every ten Africans taken in bondage to the Americas had disembarked (arrived) in either Brazil or the islands of the Caribbean. Sugar—so labor intensive and difficult to produce—ruled these regions. African laborers toiled from sunup to sunset under grueling conditions. So harsh was this labor that the average life expectancy for a slave in Brazil was only twenty-three years. The high mortality rate only led to even greater demand for enslaved people in Brazil.

The American leg of the trade between Europe, the Americas, and Africa focused on the cultivation of raw materials and cash crops to be sent to markets and manufacturers in Europe. The wealth generated by sugar plantations was then used "to prime the economic pump" (stimulate the economy) back in England. This cycle involved the investment of this capital (money) into industries that created the products the African elite wanted, which could then be traded for more slaves. Thus, the triangular trade was born.

Europeans fiercely protected their trading rights in Africa. The mercantilist economies wanted to make sure they were selling and exporting more than they were buying and importing. The slave trade was the way to do it, bringing to European nations more money (gold and silver) than ever before. This wealth would also help to bring about the Industrial Revolution, which first began in the European nation of Great Britain.

**Middle passage**

The leg of the triangular trade linking Africa to the Americas was called the Middle Passage. This journey across miles of ocean usually began in ports along the western coasts of Africa. That's where African and European slave traders exchanged goods for enslaved people. That's where the 12.5 million Africans who were captured and enslaved embarked on the voyage. As discussed earlier, the enslaved were a diverse mix of different ethnic communities from Africa's interior. Some of them were transported over 1,000 miles from their homes as captives of slave traders who carried European-made firearms. They were abducted, traded, and marched toward the coasts to be put in castle-like prisons, which can still be seen along the coast of Ghana and other West African nations. They were held there until European ships sailed into nearby waters. These castles, known as "Points of No Return," were the last places on the continent that almost all of those who entered would see. From those castle-shaped prisons, they were put on ships bound for the other side of the world. Conditions on these ships were so harsh that 15 percent of them would die on the two-to-three-month journey. Confined between decks at night, chained together and stacked like luggage, each captive had less space than a body in a coffin. Feces, urine, and vomit accumulated. When someone died, the traders would not notice until morning, forcing the living to share space with the dead until someone opened the latch. There is little about these journeys that isn't horrifying to recall. Because disease could wipe out a ship's whole population, living people showing any symptoms were usually tossed overboard in the same manner as the corpses.

In good weather, the captives were brought to the top deck for exercise, still shackled. They were often fed mushy beans and given a pannikin (small metal drinking cup) of water. This was their only food until their vessel closed in on its destination. At that point they were fed some meat and more calories to try to undo signs of malnourishment. This was done not out of kindness, but so they would fetch a better price when sold. Eventually the slaves would disembark, frequently at a distance from the main harbor, and be brought to shore. They were sold in what can only be described as livestock markets. Upon arrival at the home of their new owner, this impossibly harsh journey was over, and future horrors awaited them.