**The Transatlantic Slave Trade**

**Overview**

Over the course of more than three and a half centuries, the forcible transportation in bondage of at least twelve million men, women, and children from their African homelands to the Americas changed forever the face and character of the modern world. The slave trade was brutal and horrific, and the enslavement of Africans was cruel, exploitative, and dehumanizing. Together, they represent one of the longest and most sustained assaults on the very life, integrity, and dignity of human beings in history.

In the Americas, besides the considerable riches their free labor created for others, the importation and subsequent enslavement of the Africans would be the major factor in the resettlement of the continents following the disastrous decline in their indigenous population. Between 1492 and 1776, an estimated 6.5 million people migrated to and settled in the Western Hemisphere. More than five out of six were Africans. Although victimized and exploited, they created a new, largely African, Creole society and their forced migration resulted in the emergence of the so-called Black Atlantic.

The transatlantic slave trade laid the foundation for modern capitalism, generating immense wealth for business enterprises in America and Europe. The trade contributed to the industrialization of northwestern Europe and created a single Atlantic world that included western Europe, western Africa, the Caribbean islands, and the mainlands of North and South America.

On the other hand, the overwhelming impact on Africa of its involvement in the creation of this modern world was negative. The continent experienced the loss of a significant part of its able-bodied population, which played a part in the social and political weakening of its societies that left them open, in the nineteenth century, to colonial domination and exploitation.

**The Development of the Trade**

In the mid-fifteenth century, Portuguese ships sailed down the West African coast in a maneuver designed to bypass the Muslim North Africans, who had a virtual monopoly on the trade of sub-Saharan gold, spices, and other commodities that Europe wanted. These voyages resulted in maritime discoveries and advances in shipbuilding that later would make it easier for European vessels to navigate the Atlantic. Over time, the Portuguese vessels added another commodity to their cargo: African men, women, and children.

Starting in 1492, Africans were part of every expedition into the regions that became the Spanish colonies in the Americas. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, they were brought as slaves to grow sugar and mine gold on Hispaniola, and were forced to drain the shallow lakes of the Mexican plateau, thereby finalizing the subjugation of the Aztec nation. In a bitter twist, the Africans were often forced to perform tasks that would help advance the genocide that would resolve the vexing "Indian question."

By the middle of the seventeenth century, the slave trade entered its second and most intense phase. The creation of ever-larger sugar plantations and the introduction of other crops such as indigo, rice, tobacco, coffee, cocoa, and cotton would lead to the displacement of an estimated seven million Africans between 1650 and 1807. The demand for labor resulted in numerous innovations, encouraged opportunists and entrepreneurs, and accrued deceptions and barbarities, upon which the slave trade rested. Some slave traders - often well-respected men in their communities - made fortunes for themselves and their descendants. The corresponding impact on Africa was intensified as larger parts of west and central Africa came into the slavers' orbit.

The third and final period of the transatlantic slave trade began with the ban on the importation of captives imposed by Britain and the United States in 1807 and lasted until the 1860s. Brazil, Cuba, and Puerto Rico were the principal destinations for Africans, since they could no longer legally be brought into North America, the British or French colonies in the Caribbean, or the independent countries of Spanish America. Despite this restricted market, the numbers of deported Africans did not decline until the late 1840s. Many were smuggled into the United States. At the same time, tens of thousands of Africans rescued from the slave ships were forcibly settled in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and several islands of the Caribbean.

**Capture and Enslavement**

War, slave raiding, kidnapping, and politico-religious struggle accounted for the vast majority of Africans deported to the Americas. Several important wars resulted in massive enslavement, including the export of prisoners across the Atlantic, the ransoming of others, and the use of enslavement within Africa itself.

After 1700, the importation of firearms heightened the intensity of many of the wars and resulted in a great increase in the numbers of enslaved peoples. European forces intervened in some of the localized fighting and in warfare all along the Atlantic coast. They sought to obtain captives directly in battle or as political rewards for having backed the winning side. Working from their permanent colonies at Luanda, Benguela, and other coastal points, the Portuguese conducted joint military ventures into the hinterlands with their African allies.

Africans also became enslaved through non-military means. Judicial and religious sanctions and punishments removed alleged criminals, people accused of witchcraft, and social misfits through enslavement and banishment. Rebellious family members might be expelled from their homes through enslavement. Human pawns, especially children, held as collateral for debt were almost always protected from enslavement by relatives and customary practices. However, debts and the collateral for those debts were sometimes subjected to illegal demands, and pawned individuals, especially children, were sometimes "sold" or otherwise removed from the watchful eyes of the relatives and communities that had tried to safeguard their rights.

Africans were also kidnapped, though kidnapping was a crime in most communities, and sold into slavery. Captives were sometimes ransomed, but this practice often encouraged the taking of prisoners for monetary rewards.

As the slave trade destroyed families and communities, people tried to protect their loved ones. Various governments and communal institutions developed means and policies that limited the trade's impact. Muslims were particularly concerned with protecting the freedom of their co-religionists. Qur'anic law stated that those of the Faith born free must remain free. But this precept was often violated.

Throughout Africa, people of all beliefs tried to safeguard their own. Some offered themselves in exchange for the release of their loved ones. Others tried to have their kin redeemed even after they had been shipped away. Resistance took the form of attacks on slave depots and ships, as well as revolts in the forts, in barracoons, and on slave ships.

But at a higher level, the political fragmentation - many small centralized states and federations governed through secret societies - made it virtually impossible to develop methods of government that could effectively resist the impact of the slave trade. Even the largest states, such as Asante and Oyo, were small by modern standards. Personal gain and the interests of the small commercial elites who dominated trade routes, ports, and secret societies also worked against the freeing of captives, offenders, and displaced children, who could easily end up in the slave trade.

**Traders and Trade**.

The trade was propelled by credit flowing outward from Europe and used by merchants to purchase men, women, and children in West Africa. They purchased goods in advance on credit in then paid later with captive slaves. The wares sent to Africa in exchange for captives included those that could be used as money: cowry shells, strips of cloth (often imported from India), iron bars, copper bracelets (manillas), silver coins, and gold. These goods also had value as commodities: cloth could be turned into clothing, iron into hoes and other tools. Consumer goods included textiles, alcohol, and jewelry. Their importation supplemented but did not replace the local production of these items. Alcohol was regarded as a luxury, except in Muslim communities, where it was prohibited. Military goods, principally firearms, were also exchanged for captives.

Merchants experimented with various trading methods. In some places, such as Old Calabar and the minor ports of the Upper Guinea Coast, individuals who were often the relatives of local merchants and officials were accepted by ship captains as collateral for credit. These individuals were human pawns who could be enslaved if debts were not paid.

The trade was a high-risk enterprise. The commodity was people; they could escape, be murdered, commit suicide, or fall victim to epidemics or natural disasters. Local traders could disappear with their payment and never produce the captives stipulated in the contract. Since the slave trade went across political and cultural frontiers, there was little recourse to courts and governments in the event of commercial dishonesty. No international court or judicial system existed to handle the extraordinary violations of human rights that defined every aspect of the slave trade.

The slave trade was driven by both demand and greed. The customers in the Americas who could afford it desperately needed labor and did not care how it was obtained. Traders could benefit immensely from theft, plunder, kidnapping, ransoming, and the sale of human beings as commodities. These slavers took advantage of African political troubles, religious differences, legal technicalities, economic crises, and outright callousness to exploit helpless individuals.

**The Middle Passage**

On the first leg of their three-part journey, often called the Triangular Trade, European ships brought manufactured goods to Africa; on the second, they transported African men, women, and children to the Americas; and on the third leg, they exported to Europe the sugar, rum, cotton, and tobacco produced by the enslaved labor force. Traders referred to the Africa-Americas part of the voyage as the " Middle Passage" and the term has survived to denote the Africans' ordeal.

Well over 30,000 voyages from Africa to the Americas have been documented. But numbers and statistics alone cannot convey the horror of the experience. However, the records provide detailed information on some aspects of this tragedy.

The dreadful Middle Passage could last from one to three months and epitomized the role of violence in the trade. Based on regulations, ships could transport only about 350 people, but some carried more than 800 men, women, and children. Branded, stripped naked for the duration of the voyage, lying down amidst filth, enduring almost unbearable heat, compelled by the lash to dance on deck to straighten their limbs, all captives went through a frightening, incredibly brutal and dehumanizing experience.

Men were shackled under deck, and all Africans were subjected to abuse and punishment.

Some people tried to starve themselves to death, but the crew forced them to take food by whipping them, torturing them with hot coal, or forcing their mouths open by using special instruments or by breaking their teeth.

The personal identity of the captives was denied. Women and boys were often used for the pleasure of the crew. Ottobah Cugoano, who endured the Middle Passage in the eighteenth century, recalled: "it was common for the dirty filthy sailors to take the African women and lie upon their bodies."

Mortality brought about by malnutrition, dysentery, smallpox, and other diseases was very high. Depending on the times, upwards of 20 percent died from various epidemics or committed suicide. Venture Smith, describing his ordeal, wrote: "After an ordinary passage, except great mortality by the small pox, which broke out on board, we arrived at the island of Barbadoes: but when we reached it, there were found out of the two hundred and sixty that sailed from Africa, not more than two hundred alive." It was not unusual for captains and crew to

**Africans in America**

Of the estimated ten million men, women, and children who survived the Middle Passage, approximately 450,000 Africans disembarked on North America's shores. They thus represented only a fraction - 5 percent-- of those transported during the 350-year history of the international slave trade. Brazil and the Caribbean each received about nine times as many Africans.

The labor of enslaved Africans proved crucial in the development of South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, and Maryland and contributed indirectly through commerce to the fortunes of New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. Though the enforced destination of Africans was primarily to plantations and farms for work in cash crop agriculture, they were also used in mining and servicing the commercial economy. They were placed in towns and port cities as domestic servants; and many urban residents performed essential commercial duties working as porters, teamsters, and craftsmen.

In eighteenth-century America, Africans were concentrated in the agricultural lowlands of South Carolina and Georgia, especially in the Sea Islands, where they grew rice, cotton, indigo, and other crops. In Louisiana, they labored on sugarcane plantations. They were employed on tobacco farms in the tidewater region of Virginia and Maryland. The tidewater, together with the Georgia and South Carolina lowlands, accounted for at least two-thirds of the Africans brought into North America prior to the end of legal importation in 1807.

**The Suppression of the Slave Trade**

Article I, Section 9, Clause 1 of the U.S. Constitution (1787) stipulated that "The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight, but a Tax or duty may be imposed on such Importation, not exceeding ten dollars for each Person."

In consequence, the United States abolished its slave trade from Africa, effective January 1, 1808. But slave trading, now illegal, continued unabated until 1860.

The U.S. Slave Trade Act, enacted by a vote of 63 in favor and 49 against in February 1807, was a half victory for the slavers because it specified that the Africans illegally brought to slaveholding states would still be sold and enslaved. Penalties merely consisted of fines. With the authorities turning a blind eye and refusing to enforce their own law, the illegal slave trade flourished for several decades, particularly in Texas (Spanish until 1821), Florida (Spanish until 1818), Louisiana, and South Carolina.

Africans were sold with little secrecy. As recounted by a slave smuggler, it was an easy task: "I soon learned how readily, and at what profits, the Florida negroes were sold into the neighboring American States. The kaffle [ coffle] . . . [was to] cross the boundary into Georgia, where some of our wild Africans were mixed with various squads of native blacks, and driven inland, till sold off, singly or by couples, on the road."

The introduction of African captives took such proportions that President Madison wrote to Congress: "it appears that American citizens are instrumental in carrying on a traffic in enslaved Africans, equally in violation of the laws of humanity, and in defiance of those of their own country."

Congress passed a tougher law in 1820 making international slave trading an act of piracy punishable by death. Even though the traffic went on, only one American was ever executed for this crime. In addition, American slavers, particularly from New York and Rhode Island, shipped Africans to Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil, where the slave trade was still legal.

More than 3.3 million Africans were transported between 1801 and 1867, the vast majority to Brazil and Cuba. Half came from west-central Africa, and more than 40 percent were originally from the Bights of Benin and Biafra, and Southeast Africa - Mozambique and Madagascar.

In the 1850s, a movement developed in the South to re-open the international slave trade. It was defeated, but the illegal importation of Africans increased between 1850 and 1860, even though the African Squadron, established by the U.S. government in 1843 patrolled the harbors of the African coast.

Although their respective countries had officially outlawed the transatlantic slave trade, American and British slavers and traders continued to be openly involved in it, and their activities brought money and work to shipbuilders, crews, insurance companies, and manufacturers of various trade goods, guns, and shackles. Slave ships brought Africans until the Civil War. The *Clotilda* landed more than a hundred men, women, and children from Benin and Nigeria in the summer of 1860 at Mobile, Alabama. The *Wanderer* had discharged several hundred people from the Congo on Jekyll Island, Georgia, in November 1858. In both cases, the Africans were sold and enslaved. As a testimony to the persistence of the illegal slave trade, the 1870 Census reveals the presence, in the United States, of numerous men and women born in Africa well after 1808.

**Impact of the Slave Trade on Africa**

The negative impact of the international slave trade on Africa was immense. It can be seen on the personal, family, communal, and continental levels. In addition to the millions of able-bodied individuals captured and transported, the death toll and the economic and environmental destruction resulting from wars and slave raids were startlingly high. In the famines that followed military actions, the old and very young were often killed or left to starve.

Forced marches of the captives over long distances claimed many lives. A large number of the enslaved were destined to remain in Africa - many were transported across the Sahara to the north - which heightened the impact of the slave trade on the continent. It is estimated that the population of Africa remained stagnant until the end of the nineteenth century.

Besides its demographic toll, the slave trade, and the Africans' resistance to it, led to profound social and political changes. Social relations were restructured and traditional values were subverted. The slave trade resulted in the development of predatory regimes, as well as stagnation or regression. Many communities relocated as far from the slavers' route as possible. In the process, their technological and economic development was hindered as they devoted their energy to hiding and defending themselves.

The disruption was immense: the relationships between kingdoms, ethnic groups, religious communities, castes, rulers and subjects, peasants and soldiers, the enslaved and the free, were transformed. In some decentralized societies, people evolved new styles of leadership that led to more rigid, hierarchical structures, thought to better ensure protection.

In addition, European powers intervened in the political process to prevent the rise of the African centralized states that would have hampered their operations.

In the end, the slave trade left the continent underdeveloped, disorganized, and vulnerable to the next phase of European hegemony: colonialism.

**Legacies in America**

The slave trade and slavery left a legacy of violence. Brutality, often of near-bestial proportions, was the principal condition shaping the character of the enforced migration, whether along a trade route, on board ship, or laboring on an American plantation. The degree of power concentrated in the hands of North American slave owners, interested only in maximizing their profits, allowed excessive levels of physical punishment and the perpetuation of sexual abuse and exploitation that have marked in many ways the development of the African-American community.

There was a marked sexual component to the assaults: rape was common. Kinship was disregarded, particularly the paternity of children. Their status reflected the enslaved status of their mothers, no matter who their father might have been. Slave owners treated their unpaid, overworked labor forces as mere chattel (personal property).

Avoiding and resisting violence were determining characteristics of the responses of the Africans to their forced migration experience. Individuals attempted to evade physical abuse through strategies of accommodation, escape, and on several occasions, violent rebellion. The preservation and adaptation of African cultural forms to respond to the new needs of the enslaved population was also an act of resistance to the imposition of European norms.

Unlike earlier slave systems, in the Americas racial distinctions were used to keep the enslaved population in bondage. Contrary to what happened in Latin America, where racial stratification was more complex, in North America, any person of identifiable African descent, no matter the degree of "white" ancestry, was classified as colored, Negro, or black. A racial caste system was established, and as a result racialized attitudes and racism became an inherent and lasting part of North American culture.

Though enslaved individuals came from widely different backgrounds and the number of ethnic groups and markers of identity were extensive, certain ethnicities, cultural forms, and languages - usually in pidgin and creolized forms - as well as religions proved sustainable and were maintained, sometimes exaggerated and manipulated during the process of adjusting to enslavement in the Americas.

The overarching result of African migration during the slavery era was an "American" culture, neither "European" nor "African," created in a political and economic context of inequality and oppression. The African contribution to this new culture was a towering legacy, hugely impacting on language, religion, music, dance, art, and cuisine. Most importantly, an enduring sense of African-American community developed in the face of white racism.