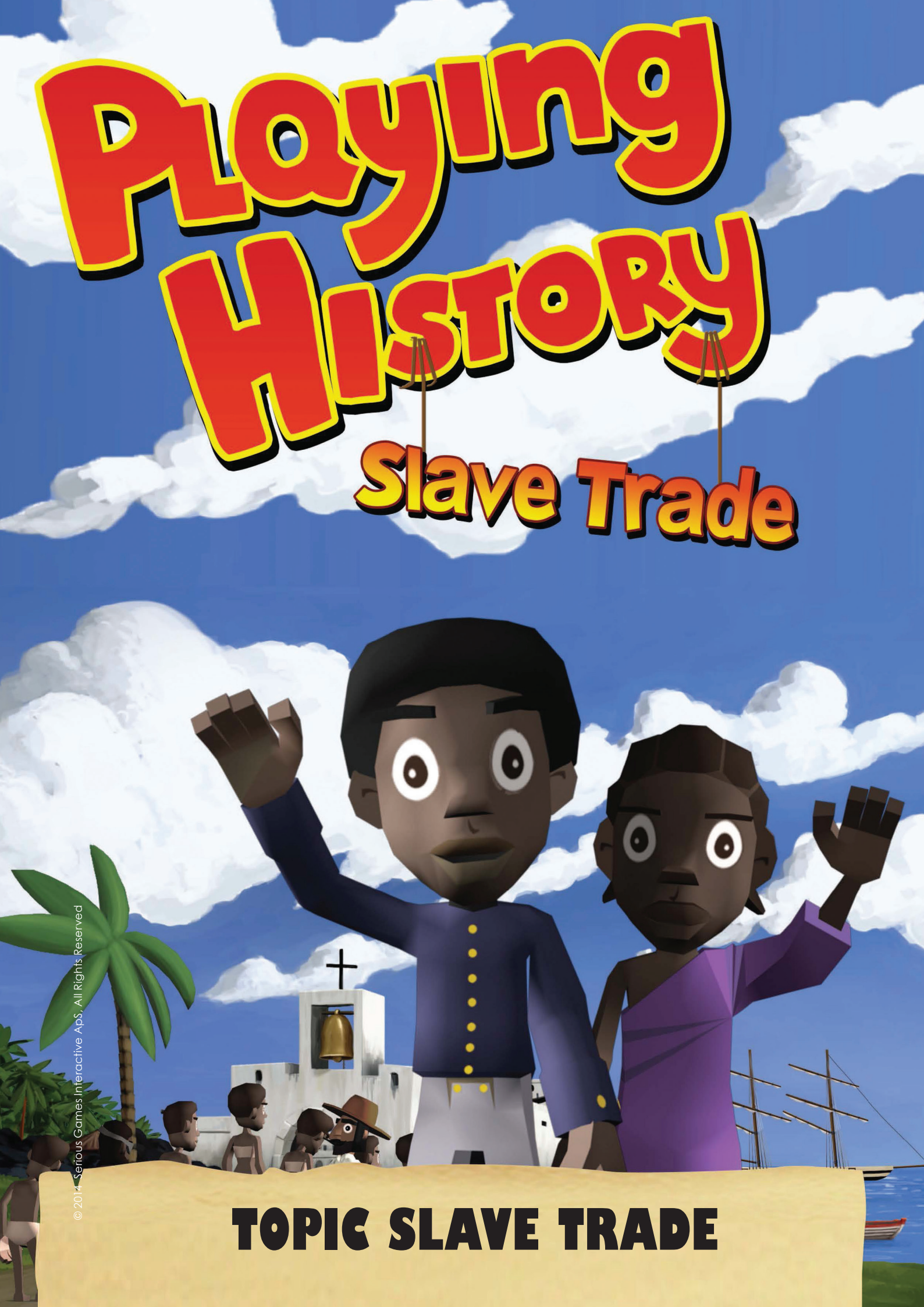
Playing History

Slave Trade



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TOPIC SLAVE TRADE

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TOPIC FOR SLAVETRADE

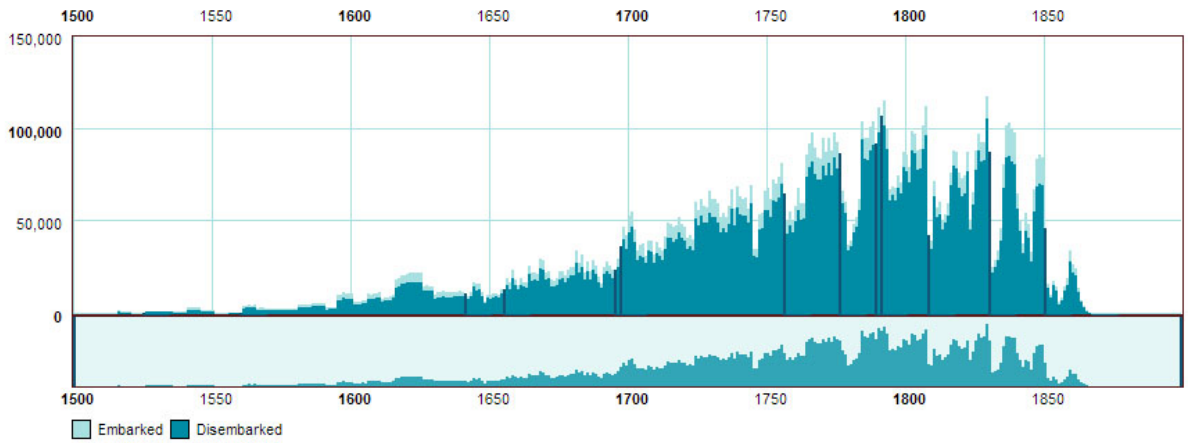
OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE - AFRICAN SLAVES IN AMERICA

Over a period of 400 years, approximately 13 million people were sold as slaves and transported across the ocean from Africa to North and South America. Nearly 11 million survived the voyage, which was often physically and psychologically damaging to the passengers. The trading of slaves from Africa to America is an important event in world history. It had an enormous impact on the people involved as well as on the course of history in North and South America, Europe and Africa.

Facts about the slave trade

It is hard to calculate precisely how many slaves crossed the Atlantic, but most historians estimate that approximately 11 million slaves reached the Americas. An estimated 12 or 13 million were transported across the Atlantic, but 10-20% of them did not survive. The trade in African slaves to European colonies lasted from the late 15th century to the late 19th century and peaked in the 18th century when about 6 million slaves crossed the Atlantic. Bringing in new slaves was necessary since the slave population did not reproduce fast enough due to the harsh living and working conditions of the slaves (except for slaves in certain southern parts of the USA). The table below shows the number of slaves transported from Africa to America between 1500 and 1875.

The light blue color represents the slaves who boarded the ships but died during the voyage, and the blue one represents the slaves who were still alive when they reached America.



www.slavevoyages.org

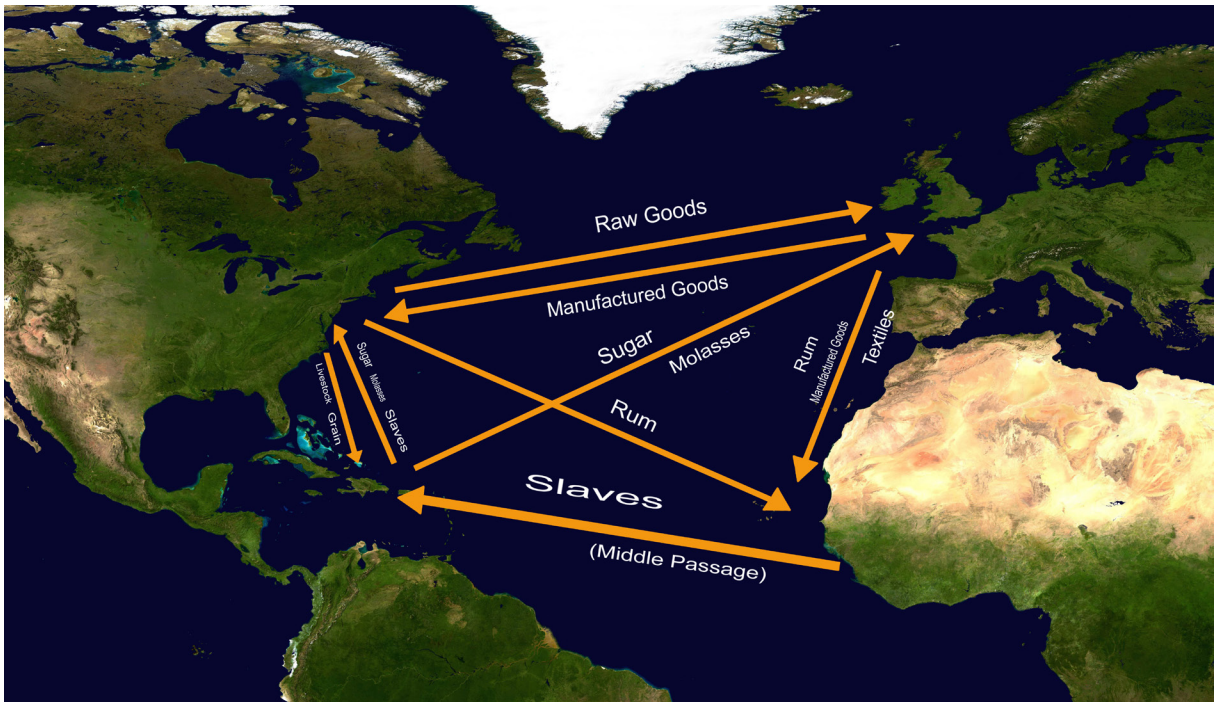
Triangular trade

The trade of African slaves was part of the so-called ''triangular trade'': Ships sailed from Europe loaded with goods to be traded for slaves – goods much in demand in Africa, such as weapons, ammunition, spirits, cloth, clothes and factory-made products. The ships then headed for America carrying slaves. On the voyage back to Europe from the American colonies, the ships were laden with products from colony plantations or mines: sugar, rice, cotton, tobacco, gold and silver. The sailing route thus outlined a triangle between Europe, Africa and America.

This route also made the most of oceanic currents, changing seasons and prevailing wind directions in the Atlantic: On the voyage from Africa to America, the ships were borne along by the Equatorial Current, which runs along the Equator from Africa to America, and the Gulf Stream helped carry the ships from Central America and back to Europe across the Northern Atlantic. The entire voyage took about a year.

Portuguese explorers were the first to reach the Western coast of Africa, though the Spanish were the first to buy slaves in Africa and transport them to their American colonies. Other countries, among them France, Great Britain, Denmark and Holland, later took up the slave trade as well. As Great Britain developed its navy and established colonies in America, it became the dominant slave trading nation.

Map of the triangular trade



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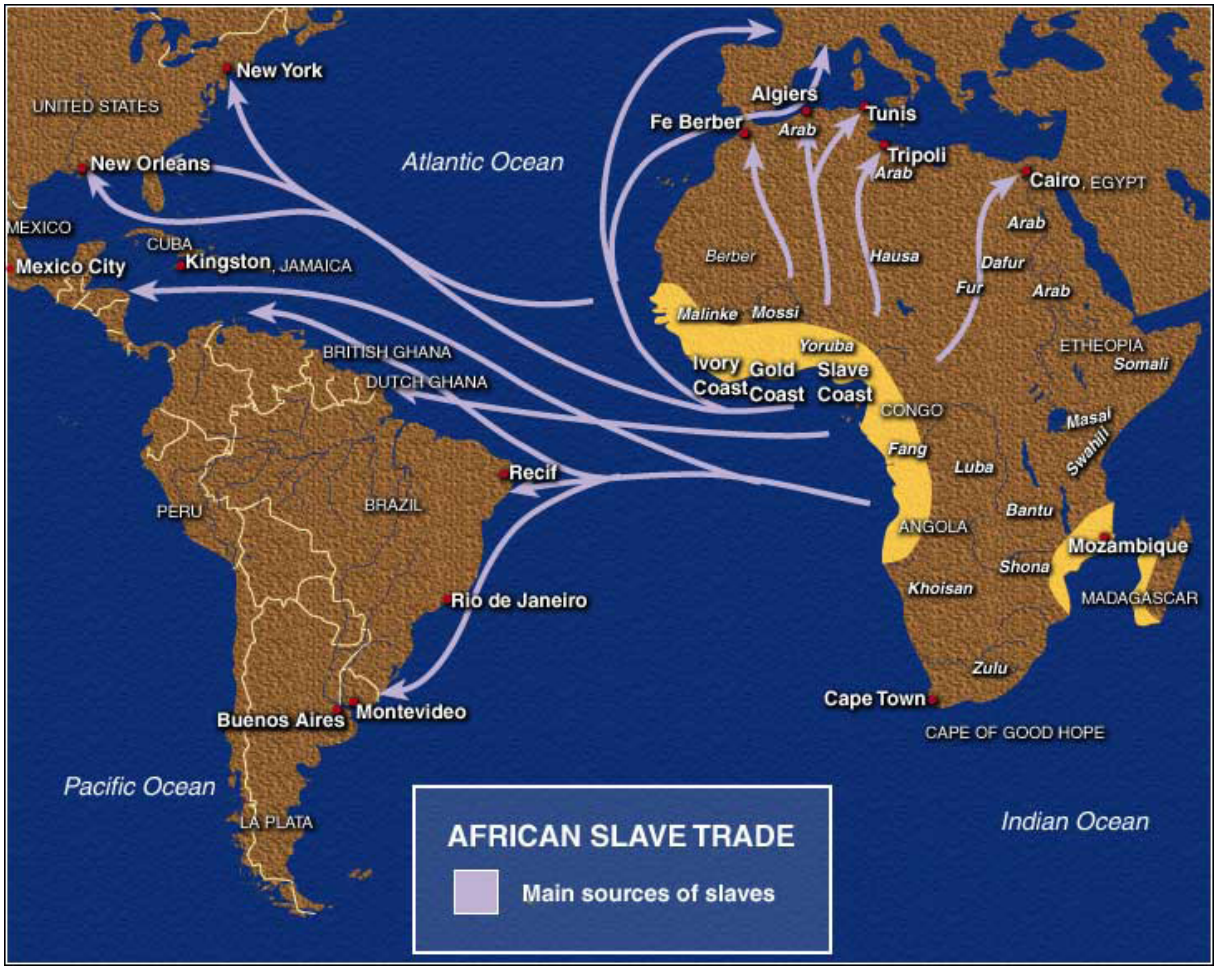
Buying slaves in Africa

When the Europeans started buying slaves in Africa, there was already a developed slave-trade. In Northern Africa, slave trade had existed from as early as the 7th century. South of the Sahara, slave trading was going on as well, but it is unclear how long this practice had existed at the time. The slaves were bought in Central and West Africa. Often, European slave traders had to offer gifts to the local king or chief in order to gain permission to build a fort and buy slaves. The people who became slaves were often prisoners of war, people who were unable to pay off a large debt or people struck by famine or poverty. Others were captured and enslaved on raids into the country where one tribe would attack another. Finally, some of slaves sold by the Africans were actually bought in Northern Africa.

The Europeans were not the only ones who wanted slaves however: African kings and powerful chiefs also kept slaves as field workers and servants at their courts.

The Europeans did not go on raids themselves to capture slaves. The African partners of the European slave traders got hold of the slaves and sold them at the coastal forts constructed by the Europeans. The West Africans gradually found themselves in a vicious circle: They had to capture slaves to trade for European weapons so they could maintain their power against other tribes who were also stockpiling weapons and ammunition from the European slave traders.

The yellow areas on the map of Africa indicate where the slaves came from



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The voyage across the Atlantic

The voyage across the Atlantic took between two and five months, and it was very hard on the slaves. They were stowed extremely close together to make room for as many as possible. Many fell ill during the voyage, and between 10 and 20 percent did not survive the voyage. If the crew found themselves running short of food or water, they would throw slaves overboard. The Europeans on the ships were always afraid that the slaves would revolt. Male slaves were therefore chained together in pairs, and if they were allowed on deck for some fresh air, they were always restricted to small groups. From time to time, slaves would jump overboard of their own accord to put an end to their suffering and grim fate.

The work and working conditions of the slaves

70 percent of the slaves in the European colonies in America were producing sugar on sugar cane plantations. The rest worked on other plantations (coffee, cotton or tobacco) or in gold and silver mines.

> *The slave owners lived in constant fear of slave uprisings. To deter the slaves from trying to escape or revolt, they were punished severely even for small offenses.*

It was very hard for the slaves to escape from bondage. They could try to run away, but it was very difficult and punished severely. They could buy their own freedom, but it was practically impossible to save up enough money. On most plantations, slaves were allowed to cultivate a small piece of land to feed themselves and their families. The slaves were allowed to keep any money earned from selling the produce from it. However, if a slave was rented out, the wages were paid to his or her owner.

It goes without saying that being enslaved and having to live the life of a slave was extremely hard physically and psychologically on each individual. Being taken away from their familiar environment in Africa and transported to America was an enormous change to them, and their working life was dangerous without any prospects of improvement or liberation.

The impact of slave trade

The slave trade has had an enormous impact on the development of Europe, Africa and America, and it is partly responsible for the technological and financial imbalances between the three continents.

Some historians think that the insufficient development of African industry and living standards is to a large extent attributable to the slave trade. They argue that there was no great difference between the levels of social and technological development in Africa and Europe in the 17th century. The largest difference was that ship building technology was more advanced in Europe. The populations of Europe and America grew rapidly in the centuries of slave trading while the population of Africa practically stagnated. The economic surplus created by slavery partially financed the industrial revolutions in Europe and America.

For instance, the invention and development of the steam engine (by James Watt) was sponsored by Caribbean plantation owners. Besides the population drain mainly among young, healthy men, the hunt for slaves also led to the downfall of former West African kingdoms. For instance, the kingdom of Congo was destroyed because of wars between a number of tribes from different regions. The slave trade proved detrimental in breaking down the social order in the African communities.

The impact of African culture on American culture

It was hard for the slaves to hang on to or practice their own culture in America, partly because of their harsh physical and psychological living conditions and partly because they were mixed with slaves from other ethnic groups than their own. This made it hard to cultivate the cultural sense of community that the slaves felt within their individual ethnic groups.

Nevertheless, a number of American cultural elements have roots in the culture of African slaves, among them languages (the so-called Creoles mixing English and African languages), cooking (such as barbeque sauce), religion (voo-doo), music (jazz), farming techniques, clothing etc.

Racism

In America and the Caribbean, being a slave was tied to negative racial stereotyping. The slaves were mainly black Africans. In many states, it was forbidden to teach slaves to read or write. Likewise, it was forbidden for slaves to travel freely, carry arms and vote in elections. These restrictions originally applied to slaves only but were later extended to all black people even after slavery was abolished. In the 19th century, slavery and the inferior social status of black people let to a general perception of black people as a lesser race. For instance, black people were regarded as less intelligent than white people.

Abolition of slavery

In some places, slave trade was abolished first and slavery itself only later (i.e. the keeping of slaves already purchased). In others, slavery in all its forms was abolished simultaneously.

Vermont was the first American state to abolish slavery in 1777. Massachusetts followed suit in 1783. Virginia was the first American state to ban the trading of slaves when in 1778 they banned the import of slaves for selling. Denmark was the first European country to abolish slave trade in 1792 though it did not take effect until 1803. Great Britain was the first slave trading country to ban slave trade (in 1807) while the USA did not ban the import of slaves until 1808.

The abolition of slavery itself (and not merely the trading of slaves) in the European colonies-in America happened in the following years: 1833 in the British Colonies, 1865 in the USA and 1888 in Brazil and Cuba.

There were several reasons for the abolition of slavery
First of all, political and civil movements working to abolish slavery had begun to form. Some published articles or lobbied politicians and governments. Furthermore, there was also considerable opposition from the slaves themselves and from African leaders. In Haiti (Saint-Domingue at the time), the slaves managed to drive away the French and a black republic was established in 1791 lasting until 1804. Shifts in mainstream philosophy and new political ideologies also played a part in the changing of people's attitudes. The natural law philosophers of the Enlightenment regarded it as morally wrong for one person to keep another person as a slave. The ideas of the Enlightenment found their way into the political movements seeking to abolish slavery.

A third reason as to why the abolition of slavery took place at this period of time was the shift of the economic center of gravity from the plantations of southern U.S. states to the industrial corporations of the northern states and Great Britain. It brought prestige and political influence as well as economic power.

> *The two countries who allowed slavery the longest, Cuba and Brazil, were both non-industrialised nations.*

Though it had been banned, slave trade and slave trans- ports continued until the late 19th century. Many British ships were employed to try to prevent transports of slaves across the Atlantic during this period. However, the slave transports did not stop entirely until slavery was abolished in America.

Historical examples of slavery

The African slaves in America are by no means the only example of slavery in world history. Slavery used to be widespread, and instances of people making other people work for them – servants, that is, who were not free and did not have the same rights as their masters, have occurred in many cultures throughout time. For instance, slaves were kept in ancient Greece, in the Roman Empire and in China, but also in Japan, Korea and India where slaves made up between 10 and 15 % of the populations in the 19th century. In Viking-age Europe, slavery was widespread in Scandinavia and Great Britain where slaves (or thralls) are estimated to have made up 10 % of the populations. In Islamic nations in Northern Africa and the Middle East, slavery was widespread from about 600 to 900 BCE and later in the 17th and 18th centuries. Examples are known of slaves having made up as much as 50 to 75 % of a population.

Even though slavery was such a common occurrence in so many cultures, the lives of slaved differed widely from country to country. In many slave societies, for instance in Northern Africa and the Arabic nations, slaves were members of society and of households on a more equal footing with their masters than in America.

In the Ottoman Empire, for instance, slaves were known to achieve very high status serving as generals or even grand viziers. In contrast, slaves in America had to generate a profit and practically serve as machines, which limited their opportunities for social advancement; slaves had to become a separate community that suffered very low social status.

Slavery today

Slavery exists today as well, though contemporary slavery is somewhat different from what is commonly associated with the word. Modern-day slaves are not kept under strict watch, punished regularly or forced to work on plantations, but many of them live a life with little freedom and no rights and are forced to undertake extremely hard work.

> *According to Wikipedia, between 12 and 27 million people are enslaved. Many are debt slaves, a phenomenon common in Southern Asia in particular but also found in South America. Sometimes, debt and debt slavery is even passed on from generation to generation. Human trafficking, i.e. people being sold into prostitution, is also a kind of slavery.*

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