Britain and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Summary

- The transatlantic slave trade operated from approximately the 16th to the 19th century.[1] There is wide disagreement about how many slaves were affected, but the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has estimated that approximately 17 million Africans were transported across the Atlantic as part of the trade.[2]
- The Slave Trade Abolition Act was passed in the British Parliament on 25 March 1807. The Act "made it illegal to engage in the slave trade throughout the British colonies".[3] However, the trade continued in other European countries for some time.
- The UNESCO International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition is held on the 23 August each year. The date marks the beginning of the uprising in Santo Domingo, in which slaves revolted against their owners on the night of 22–23 August 1791.
- Over the last century, international organisations, including the United Nations and the European Union, have prohibited slavery in charters and conventions, and continue to act against modern forms of slavery.

Background

UNESCO describes the slave trade as "the biggest tragedy in the history of humanity".[4] This briefing focuses on the transatlantic slave trade and its abolition in Britain and its colonies. The slave trade was abolished in Britain in 1807, but it was not until 1833 that the practice of slavery itself was banned in the British Empire.[5]

The transatlantic slave trade operated largely between Europe, Africa and the Americas, leading some to refer to it as "the triangular trade".[6] Recent assessments, however, have noted that the transatlantic slave trade was "a remarkably complex commercial empire […] for each point of the trading system was linked to a much broader system of global trade".[7]

The transatlantic slave trade in its simplest form operated as follows: goods such as weapons or gun powder from Europe would be traded in Africa for slaves, who would be sent across the Atlantic to work on plantations or, later, as domestic servants. Products from the plantations such as sugar, cotton or tobacco would be transported back to be sold on the European market.[8] This circuit would take around 18 months to complete.[9] Operating within this framework would be additional trading systems. On the sub-Saharan coast, for example, African slaves would be exchanged for "commodities culled from Britain's pervasive world trade" such as Indian textiles or French wines.[10]

There is disagreement about the number of Africans affected by the transatlantic slave trade. UNESCO has estimated that the trade lasted for four centuries, during which time approximately 17 million slaves were deported across the Atlantic. This figure does not include slaves that died during the journey, or those that were killed during wars associated with the trade.[11]

Britain became involved in the transatlantic slave trade in the seventeenth century, although the first related voyage was made by John Hawkins in 1562.[12] The first British company to engage in the slave trade was the Royal African Company (RAC), which was given a monopoly in trading by King Charles II.[13] Parliament removed this monopoly in 1698, which caused Britain's involvement in the slave trade to increase.[14] By the mid-eighteenth century, Liverpool had become "Europe's preeminent slave port".[15] Eventually the slave trade was abolished in Britain and its colonies in 1807.[16] Later, in 1833, slavery itself was abolished in the British Empire. However, slavery continued in other countries around the world for some time.

Abolition of the Slave Trade

Historians agree the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade had multiple factors. The revolt in Santo Domingo in 1791 signalled the beginning of "the destruction of the slavery system".[17] At the same time, anti-slavery sentiment was growing in Britain—evidenced by petitions presented to Parliament "on a scale not seen before" on the issue of the slave trade.[18]

The International Day is held on 23 August to mark the beginning of the uprising in Santo Domingo (today Haiti and the Dominican Republic) in 1791.[19] According to historians, the uprising "would play a crucial role" in the ending of the transatlantic slave trade.[20]

Santo Domingo Uprising, 1791

Prior to the revolt, Santo Domingo was "the world's most profitable colony", producing tobacco, sugar and coffee.[21] The conditions the slaves were kept in were brutal; many slaves died after five to seven years of labour on the plantation, and reproduction rates were very low. It is estimated that 30,000 slaves were imported each year to the colony to maintain levels of labour needed to run the plantations.[22] A few years before the uprising, it is estimated that there were half a million slaves in the colony. This compared to 35,000 white colonialists and 25,000 "free people" (former slaves that had bought or been given their freedom).[23]

On the night of the 22 August, black slaves "attacked plantations [...], setting fire to the crops and killing or driving the white owners overseas".[24] The story of the revolution is "highly complex".[25] Following the slave revolt, Santo Domingo was invaded by French, British and Spanish forces to restore rule on the colony. In 1804, following 13 years of war, Santo Domingo was renamed 'Haiti' and the former colony "became the first independent black republic outside Africa".[26] The uprising gave European abolitionists renewed enthusiasm in their mission to abolish slavery in Europe.

Abolition in Britain: Slave Trade Abolition Act 1807

Parliament played a central role in Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the British Parliament "approved, regulated and monitored" the slave trade.[27] By the beginning of the nineteenth century, members of Parliament were leading figures in the debates to abolish the trade all together.

The movement to end the slave trade gained momentum in the 1770s and 1780s.[28] Key political figures included William Wilberforce, MP for Hull, and Prime Minister William Pitt. An inquiry into the slave trade was set up in 1788.[29] As part of evidence collected, some "maritime horror stories" were related to the British Parliament by former slave traders, which attracted the attention of the British population.[30]

Parliament undertook debates on the issue of slavery in 1789, 1791 and 1792 but no legislation was passed as a result. It was not until 1805 that Parliament began to act. Reasons for the delay include the outbreak of the French Revolution and the revolt of Santo Domingo.[31]

In 1807, the Slave Trade Abolition Act was passed and received royal assent.[32] The Act banned the trade in slaves "from any part of the coast of countries of Africa".[33] Additionally:

- Ships that were identified as being active in the slave trade would be "seized and condemned". The owner of the ship would be fined £100 per slave.[34]
- 'Freed' slaves found on illegal ships would be given other work. For example, men would be enlisted to the armed forces for unlimited service, and women and children would be apprenticed to local landowners.[35]

To aid in enforcement of the Act, the British navy embarked on anti-slavery patrols on the African coast.[36] The British also worked to persuade other European countries to follow suit. The trade in slaves was abolished in Spain in 1811; Sweden in 1813; the Netherlands in 1814; Portugal in 1819 and in France from 1826.[37]

Emancipation in Britain: Slavery Abolition Act 1833

Although the trade in slaves was banned in Britain and its colonies from 1807, the practice of slavery itself continued. Abolitionists in Britain continued the fight against slavery, whilst slaves themselves rebelled against their owners in British-held plantations.[38]

In 1823, a new abolitionist society was formed in London—the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Dominions, known as the Anti-Slavery Society.[39] The society initially worked to improve the conditions for slaves and advocate for their gradual release. But, in 1831, the group decided to call for "immediate rather than gradual emancipation" of slaves.[40]

The work of citizens in London operated against a backdrop of "slave discontent" in the British colonies.[41] Uprisings occurred in Barbados in 1816, Demerara in 1823 and Jamaica in 1831–2. These revolts strengthened the view in Britain that the practice of keeping slaves was "unjustifiable".[42]

In 1832, Parliament itself was changed by the Representation of the People Act 1832 (known as the Reform Act).[43] Some pro-slavery MPs lost their seats, replaced by candidates who supported the emancipation of slaves. This shifted the balance of opinion towards the abolitionist cause.[44] Ultimately, the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 granted slaves in the British Empire their freedom from 1834.[45] Under the Act:

- Slave owners were given £20 million in compensation for the "loss of their slaves".[46]
- Former slaves over the age of six would become apprentices for their owners. Domestic servants would serve as such for four years and field hands would serve for six.[47]

Recent International Action

The League of Nations solidified international rejection of slavery, adopting a Slavery Convention in 1926. This involved the "complete suppression of slavery in all its forms and of the slave trade by land

and sea".[48] This was further reiterated by the UN's Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which contained an article prohibiting the practice of slavery in any form.[49] The European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights prohibits slavery and forced labour.[50] More recently, international efforts have been focused on eradicating human trafficking and other forms of modern slavery which still exist across the world.[51]

Further Information

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