



What was the transatlantic slave trade?

KS3

KS4

Ages 11-18 ⌚ 5 min read

Slavery — the ownership of human beings as property — has existed in many forms throughout history. But the transatlantic slave trade, operating from the 16th to 19th centuries, was distinctive in its scale, its racial basis, and its lasting consequences.

Between approximately 1500 and 1900, an estimated 12.5 million enslaved people were transported from West and Central Africa to the Americas. About 1.8 million died during the "Middle Passage" — the brutal sea voyage across the Atlantic — and were thrown overboard. Those who survived were sold and forced to work, primarily on sugar, cotton, tobacco, and coffee plantations, under conditions of extreme violence, with no legal rights and no recourse.

How did it work?

The trade operated as a "triangle": European ships left ports like Bristol and Liverpool carrying manufactured goods to West Africa. There, these goods were traded (and raids were conducted) for enslaved people — often sold into slavery by rival African groups, though this doesn't diminish European responsibility. Ships then crossed the Atlantic to the Caribbean and Americas (the Middle Passage), selling enslaved people. Finally, they returned to Europe loaded with sugar, rum, tobacco, and cotton produced by enslaved labour.

The fortunes made from slave labour were enormous, and they flowed directly into the infrastructure of Britain. Banks were funded by it. Country houses were built from it. Universities received bequests from slave owners. The Industrial Revolution was partly financed by profits from Caribbean plantations. Understanding the transatlantic slave trade isn't just about the historical cruelty — it's about tracing where a significant part of modern wealth came from, and who paid for it without consent or compensation.

Abolition

Britain abolished the slave trade (the transportation of enslaved people) in 1807, and slavery itself in British territories in 1833 — though the enslaved people were not freed immediately and their "owners" received £20 million in compensation (the

enslaved people received nothing). The United States abolished slavery after the Civil War in 1865. Brazil was the last country in the Americas to abolish it, in 1888.

Why does it matter today?

The legacy of the slave trade is visible in persistent racial inequalities in wealth, health, and opportunity in former slave-owning societies. The trauma of slavery — enforced family separation, cultural erasure, sustained violence — reverberates through generations. Debates about reparations (financial compensation to descendants of enslaved people), removal of statues commemorating slave traders, and how history is taught in schools are all ongoing. The transatlantic slave trade shaped the world we live in, and understanding it honestly is essential to understanding the present.