



# What was the transatlantic slave trade?

KS3

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Ages 11-18 ⌚ 6 min read

Between roughly 1500 and 1900, European nations — Portugal, Spain, Britain, France, the Netherlands, and others — organised the forcible removal of an estimated 12.5 million African people from their homes and their transportation across the Atlantic Ocean to work as enslaved labourers in the Americas. Of those, around 1.8 million died on the crossing alone. It was one of the largest forced migrations in human history, and one of the most profitable criminal enterprises ever organised.

## How did it work?

European traders established posts on the West African coast. They purchased or captured enslaved people — sometimes raiding communities directly, more often buying captives from African rulers and merchants who were themselves part of the trade. The enslaved were then loaded onto ships for the "Middle Passage" — the crossing of the Atlantic. Ships were packed with people in conditions deliberately designed to maximise cargo, with no regard for human life. Crossings took weeks to months; disease, suffocation, and dehydration were common. Those who survived arrived in the Caribbean or the Americas and were sold at auction.

📦 The slave trade was run like a business — a brutal, dehumanising business that categorised people as property and optimised every stage for profit. Ships were designed with shelf-like platforms to fit more bodies. People were shackled together. Cargo manifests listed human beings alongside barrels and bolts of cloth. Understanding the trade means recognising both how intentional it was and how thoroughly it denied the humanity of its victims.

## What happened to the enslaved?

Most were put to work on plantations — large agricultural estates in the Caribbean and the Americas producing sugar, tobacco, cotton, and coffee for European markets. The work was brutal: long hours in intense heat, doing physically punishing labour, under threat of violence. Enslaved people had no legal rights, no freedom of movement, could be bought and sold, and had no right to marry, own property, or decide where they lived or who they lived with. Families were routinely separated.

Despite everything, enslaved people resisted — through work slowdowns, escape, cultural preservation, and outright rebellion. The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) was a successful slave revolt that established Haiti as the first Black republic in the Western hemisphere.

## **Who profited?**

Vast numbers of people, businesses, and institutions. The plantation economy generated enormous wealth for European colonial powers. British cities — Bristol, Liverpool, London — were substantially built on slave trade profits. Banks, insurance companies, and legal firms processed the trade. Enslaved labour was foundational to the economic development of the United States, the Caribbean, and significant parts of South America. When Britain abolished slavery in 1833, the government paid £20 million in compensation — to slave owners, not to the enslaved.

## **When did it end and what were the consequences?**

The British slave trade was abolished in 1807; slavery itself in British territories in 1833. The United States abolished slavery in 1865 following the Civil War. But the effects were not undone by abolition. The enslaved were freed into a world where they were denied land, capital, and political rights. The wealth generated by their labour remained with the families and institutions that had exploited them. The racial hierarchies that slavery had created and depended upon persisted in law and culture for generations. The consequences — economic inequality, structural racism, and generational disadvantage — remain measurable today.