**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.

For the first one hundred years, captives in small numbers were transported to Europe. By the close of the fifteenth century, 10 percent of the population of Lisbon, Portugal, then one of the largest cities in Europe, was of African origin. Other captives were taken to islands off the African shore, including Madeira, Cape Verde, and especially São Tomé, where the Portuguese established sugar plantations using enslaved labor on a scale that foreshadowed the development of plantation slavery in the Americas. Enslaved Africans could also be found in North Africa, the Middle East, Persia, India, the Indian Ocean islands, and in Europe as far as Russia.

English and Dutch ships soon joined Portugal's vessels trading along the African coast. They preyed on the Portuguese ships, while raiding and pillaging the African mainland as well. The slave trade was closely linked to the Europeans' insatiable hunger for gold, and the arrival of the Portuguese on the "Gold Coast" (Ghana) in the 1470s tapped these inland sources.

Starting in 1492, Africans were part of every expedition into the regions that became the American Spanish colonies. 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.

The sixty-year period of the Kongo civil wars, ending in 1740, was responsible for the capture and enslavement of many. Among them were the followers of the Catholic martyr Beatrice of Kongo, who tried to end the wars through pacifist protest.

After 1700, the importation of firearms heightened the intensity of many of the wars in Africa 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.

**Traders and Trade**

Western European countries established distinct national trades. The European port cities most involved in this growth industry were Bristol, Liverpool, and London in England; Amsterdam in Holland; Lisbon, the Portuguese capital; and Nantes, located on the western French coast.

On the African side most captives were traded from only a few ports: Luanda (Angola), Whydah (Bight of Benin), Bonny ( Bight of Biafra); and the adjacent "castles" at Koromantin and Winneba on the Gold Coast accounted for at least a third of the Africans transported to the Americas. Other major ports included Old Calabar (Bight of Biafra), Benguela (Southern Angola), Cabinda (north of the Congo River), and Lagos in the Bight of Benin. These nine ports accounted for at least half of all the Africans deported to the Americas.

The European countries attempted, though not successfully, to regulate the trade by chartering various national companies established under royal decree or parliamentary order. But these efforts to create monopolies, such as England's Royal African Company (RAC), were soon undermined by private merchant companies and pirates who opened up new markets in the Bight of Biafra and the northern Angola coast, and challenged the RAC on the Gold Coast and in the Gambia.

Each of the nations and their slave ports experimented with innovative marketing and trading techniques. Sometimes this competition required the maintenance of trading depots and forts - the slave "castles" or factories - as was the case in the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin, as well as in lesser ports along the Upper Guinea Coast, Senegambia, and Angola.

The trade was propelled by credit flowing outward from Europe and used by merchants to purchase men, women, and children in West Africa. They advanced goods on credit in lieu of payment in captives. 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. They were instrumental in the eighteenth-century Gold Coast wars that enslaved multitudes and led to the Asante people's political ascendancy in the region. With the exception of the Gold Coast wars, guns played little role at first in local conflicts, due in part to the difficulty of keeping powder dry in tropical regions. For example, the rise of Oyo, which became the dominant slaving power in the interior of the Bight of Benin, was mostly effected by the use of cavalry.

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.

In Angola and Senegambia, European merchants married or otherwise cohabited with local women, and these women sometimes amassed considerable fortunes as agents and merchants in their own right. Their mixed offspring became an intermediate class of merchants along the coast, but especially concentrated along the Upper Guinea Coast as far as Senegambia, and in Luanda, Benguela, and their commercial outposts in the interior of Angola.

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. There was also a direct trade between Brazil and Angola that did not include the European leg. 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 toss the sick overboard; and some even disposed of an entire cargo for insurance purposes.

On board slave ships, in the midst of their oppression, the Africans, who were often as much strangers to each other as to their European captors, forged the first links with their new American identities. Relationships established during the Middle Passage frequently resulted in revolts and other forms of resistance that bound them in new social and political alliances. Ottobah Cugoano described the attempted revolt organized on the ship that took him from the Gold Coast to Grenada: "when we found ourselves at last taken away, death was more preferable than life; and a plan was concerted amongst us, that we might burn and blow up the ship, and to perish all together in the flames . . . . It was the women and boys which were to burn the ship, with the approbation and groans of the rest; though that was prevented, the discovery was likewise a cruel bloody scene."

The special relations created on the ship lasted a lifetime and were regarded by the deported Africans, torn from their loved ones, as strongly as kinship. They had special names for those who had shared their ordeal. They were called *bâtiments* in Creole (from the French for ship), *sippi* in Surinam (from ship), and shipmate in Jamaica.

Far from wiping out all traces of their cultural, social, and personal past, the Middle Passage experience provided Africans with opportunities to draw on their collective heritage to make themselves a new people.

**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.

**Reading-Based Questions:**

1. Briefly trace the development of the slave trade making sure to identify and discuss the three phases of the slave trade.
2. Under what circumstances were Africans captured?
3. Briefly describe the traders, what they traded, and the risks involved.
4. Describe the three-part journey of the Triangular Trade.
5. Describe the conditions aboard voyages through the Middle Passage.

**The Triangular Trade Worksheet**

Information from the Reading Packet, along with the image below, will be used to complete the Triangular Trade Worksheet during in-class group-work.

