

The Atlantic Slave Trade

The Atlantic slave trade or the Euro-American slave trade involved transportation by slave traders of enslaved African people, mainly to the Americas. It was and is remains one of the darkest chapters of human history where one particular race of human beings was bought and sold as commodities.

The Atlantic Slave Trade is a topic covered extensively in the world history segment of the UPSC Mains Exam

Background of the Atlantic Slave Trade

The Renaissance brought about a technological revolution in transportation, enabling the less reliable ships of the Middle-Ages to withstand the long journeys across vast oceans. The direct outcome of this technological advancement was the discovery of a sea-route towards the North American continent by Christopher Columbus in 1498.

Now slavery as a practice had been in place for a long time in Europe, since the days of the Roman Empire through wars and criminal punishment. But the enslavement of the African people did not begin in earnest until the discovery of the Americas in 1498 and an edict passed in 1518.

On August 1518 King Charles I passed an edict authorising Spanish traders to enslave people directly from Africa and transporting them to America. This edict was significant in the sense that it negated the necessity of going through a European port first

In the Americas, European explorers were busy in their colonisation by setting up huge plantations of sugar, cotton and tobacco. The huge labour to work these plantations would be met by the influx of slaves coming in from Africa.

Before this, the Europeans enslaved the native population to do the manual labour in the plantations, as was the case in the Caribbean. But a combination of bad conditions and disease brought from the European continent began to take its toll on the natives. At certain instances, entire populations were wiped out. The colonists then began to look to Africa for slaves and the slave trade began in earnest. The Portuguese would be the ones to complete the first recorded transatlantic slave voyage when they transported African slaves to their colonies in Brazil in 1526. Soon, other Europeans would follow suit.

The Condition of the Slaves

For the next 300 years, Europeans began to make their way to the west coast of Africa for the express purpose in trading slaves. Soon huge numbers of people were being captured in the interior of Africa. Chained together so they could not escape, they were forced to march to the coast. They were sold to European slave traders, put on to ships and taken across the Atlantic.

Conditions on board the slave ships were terrible with not enough light, air, food or water. They could not move about. As many a third died on each eight-week journey. The ones who did survive were often separated from their families and sold to different slave owners at slave auctions to the highest bidder. Africans from different cultures, who spoke different languages, were thrust together. Because they could not understand each other, this prevented them from making plans to escape.

Slaves faced a hard life on the plantations where the work was heavy and the hours were long. Their accommodation was poor and they were often badly fed. Many were also whipped or beaten for the smallest mistake and many died soon after arriving on the plantations. Even the strongest rarely survived for more than ten years and very few ever saw their homeland again.

The End of the Atlantic Slave Trade

The slave trade reached its peak in the 18th century when between six and seven million people were shipped from Africa to America. The impact on traditional African societies was devastating, destroying entire kingdoms while others grew rich and rose to power on the trade. From the 1780s onwards, however, some Europeans began to realize how cruel slavery was and started to campaign against it.

This can be attributed to the spread of Humanism during the 'Age of Enlightenment' in the late 18th century. It advocated that all men are created free and equal and the ownership of fellow men for whatever reasons are acts of evil.

In the British Empire, William Wilberforce took the lead to pass an act in the British parliament that would abolish slavery. On 22 February 1807, the House of Commons passed a motion 283 votes to 16 to abolish the Atlantic slave trade. Hence, the slave trade was abolished, but not the still-economically viable institution of slavery itself, which provided Britain's most lucrative import at the time, sugar. Abolitionists did not move against sugar and slavery itself until after the sugar industry went into terminal decline after 1823.

Regardless, the British Navy would form squadrons of its own to hunt down slave ships operating within its territorial waters. Between 1807 and 1860, the Royal Navy squadrons seized about 1600 slave ships and freed an estimated 150,000 Africans.

The benefits of the Industrial Revolution had rendered the need for mass labour redundant in certain industries. This was the main economic reason for the move to end slavery while the political reasons were many.

For example, the French Revolution earlier in 1789 had spread to its colonies in Haiti where a full-scale rebellion between 1791 and 1801 had freed the country from colonial rule. Fearing similar rebellions in their own colonies, other European powers had made overtures towards the abolition of slavery.

Meanwhile, in the United States, the issue on the abolition of slavery had led to the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865. Fought between an anti-slavery North and a pro-slavery South, the war ended in a northern victory that saw the complete abolition of slavery in the continental United States.

Slavery in other regions of the Atlantic still continued especially in the Spanish and the Portuguese colonies in South America and the Caribbean. until the 1860s, when British enforcement and further diplomacy finally ended the Atlantic slave trade. In 1870, Portugal ended the last trade route with the Americas, where the last country to import slaves was Brazil. In Brazil, however, slavery itself was not ended until 1888, making it the last country in the Americas to end involuntary servitude.