

The history of slavery

A Today we find it difficult to imagine that two or three hundred years ago people in Europe and America bought, sold and 'owned' other people. They were known as slaves. The 'owners' saw nothing wrong with it. They knew that the men, women and children that they bought and sold had often been sent thousands of miles from their homes. They made them work hard and follow their rules and only gave them food and basic clothing. Many people, in those days, thought that this was a normal way of earning money – some thought that black people were different. "How else could the owners of plantations find workers for the hot, damp, unhealthy regions of the Caribbean and the American colonies?" traders¹ and slave owners asked. If they wanted to earn money with the plantations, then they had to find people to work there. The owners of these plantations were often rich traders who lived in Britain.

B In the 17th and 18th centuries traders in the great trading cities like London, Bristol, Glasgow and Liverpool discovered that the 'triangular trade' could earn them a lot of money. Ships left Britain full of goods made there like cloth, metal products – and guns. These were traded on the west coast of Africa for men, women and children. Frightened, chained together, not knowing what was going to happen to them, the Africans were packed into the ships. They were treated like any other goods, as if they didn't need food, fresh air or somewhere to move. Many of them died during this 'Middle Passage' across the Atlantic. When the ships arrived, the slaves were sold. It is hard for us today to imagine what these people must have gone through. The ships completed the triangle, crossing back over the Atlantic to Britain with the sugar, rum, coffee, cocoa, tobacco and cotton from the plantations.

C Slavery was not a new thing. Thousands of years before, the Greeks and Romans had slaves, so did the Vikings, who often went to Britain to get slaves in the 9th and 10th centuries. In the 13th century Bristol traders sent children as slaves to Ireland. Cervantes, the Spanish author of *Don Quixote*, spent five years from 1575 to 1580 as a slave in Algiers. In the 16th and 17th centuries pirates from North Africa went to the coast of south-west Britain to get slaves to row their boats. Slaves were shipped from Africa to Portuguese-owned countries along with gold and ivory². From 1503 the Spanish and Portuguese sent African slaves to Central America and the Caribbean to work in the mines and on the land. Soon the Dutch also sent African slaves to the new American colonies. By the 18th century the triangular trade, Europe – Africa – America, was a huge slavery organization. From the harbour city of Bristol alone, in about 110 years, over 2,000 ships sailed, sending almost half a million Africans to America. Ships from London carried almost as many and ships from Liverpool carried even more.

D After many years of protest and hard work in Europe and rebellions of slaves in the colonies the trade in people was stopped, at least for British ships, by the British Parliament in 1807. But slavery was not abolished in all British-owned countries until 1833. In the United States, which was still a young country, the slave trade was abolished in 1808, but the slaves who were already there had to wait another two generations before they were freed in 1865. During this time the Americans fought a Civil War, the North fought against the South. One of the main reasons for fighting was the question about slaves: Does not every man, woman or child, slave or not, have the right to be free? Many ex-slaves who had learned to read and write, wrote about their experiences at that time.

¹trader [ˈtreɪdər] – Händler • ²ivory [ˈaɪvri] – Elfenbein

1 Before you read

Look at the four pictures and say who they show and what is happening.



Read the text and mark one sentence for each picture.

2 A closer look

In a group, look more closely at one part of the text: A, B, C or D and choose a title for it. Make a mind map for your part of the text. Put your title in the middle.

3 More information

Use your mind map to make one of the things below (A, B, C or D). Then present what you have made to the class. You may want to add other information from books or the Internet.

- A: Make an anti-slavery poster.
- B: Make a sketch map of the 'triangular trade'.
- C: Make a sketch map of the world about slavery throughout history.
- D: Make a timeline about the end of slavery.

4 A discussion about slavery

If people in Britain had seen the slave ships or the plantations, they would have stopped slavery.



What does your group think? Collect ideas and tell the class about them.

5 Saying sorry for history

Talk about this statement in class:

In the last few years some black people have asked the people of cities like Bristol and Liverpool to say sorry for the slave trade.

What do you think of this idea? How could they do it?

Lösungsvorschläge: Ex. 1: a (lines 13-21), b (lines 54-56), c (lines 29-34), d (lines 1-5); Ex. 2: A It was OK to own people; B The triangular trade; C There have always been slaves; D Freeing the slaves