

# The slave trade: unceasing resistance and revolt

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Official celebrations credit William Wilberforce for the abolition of the Slave Trade. Marcus Chamoun looks at the slave rebellions that really forced Britain's hand

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century apologists for slavery made much of the fact that it had existed throughout recorded history, arguing that it was a natural or even benign state for those enslaved.

It was true that the Spanish and Portuguese, who initiated the transatlantic shipping of 'human cargo', could draw on an existing trade in African slaves. But in doing so, they massively increased its scale and completely transformed its main features.

Indigenous African slavery differed from theirs in several ways. The racial element was missing - slaves were as likely as not to have the same origins as their masters. It was not always a permanent or inherited status - slaves could marry into their masters' families and lose their slave status, or own property of their own, including other slaves. Crucially, those enslaved were used primarily in domestic service or production - whereas the European plantation colonies combined the absence of individual rights for slaves with the chaos and tyranny of production for the market, with its constant drive to reduce costs and increase output.

Why didn't the European colonists use other sources of labour? One answer is that they tried and failed. Forced labour by the indigenous 'Indian' populations of the Caribbean led to their being wiped out by disease and malnutrition. Poor or religiously persecuted Europeans, who sold themselves into indentured labour (a type of temporary slavery), usually became smallholders, unable to compete with plantation owners with the crucial advantage of scale in producing cash crops like sugar, coffee, tobacco and cotton. In the words of one historian, the colonisers were willing 'to go to the moon' to satisfy the crying demand for labour - but Africa was closer than the moon.

Crucially, in a society where most people still owned their own means of production, 'free' wage-labour would have been too expensive to use to produce these goods as cheap commodities for a mass market. In this way, slavery acted as the midwife of modern capitalism. It was necessary to reduce Africans to the status of property before a class of capitalists could arise to reduce a majority of Europeans to the status of wage-slaves.

At first, the trade was a Portuguese monopoly with the Spanish as the main buyers. John Hawkins first tried to break this monopoly with his 1562 expedition to West Africa. But the English seizure of Barbados and Jamaica from Spain meant that already, by the 1660s, England was the main slaving nation, with merchants in London, Bristol and (later) Liverpool growing rich on slaves and slave-produced goods.

## **Africans fight back**

None of this happened without resistance. As early as 1526, Nzinga Mbemba, an African ruler in the Congo, used diplomacy with King John III of Portugal to try to end the trade in his country. One of the first

recorded onboard slave revolts was in 1532, when 100 Africans on the slave ship *Misericordia* wiped out most of the crew and forced the survivors to take them back to the coast. Between 1699 and 1865, more than 50 major mutinies took place on ships during the 'Middle Passage'.

Coastal villages fortified themselves against the slave traders and the latter were often attacked before they had time to buy any slaves - as when the French slaver *Phoenix* was burnt in 1730. The crew of the English slaver *Perfect* were killed in a 1758 rescue mission that freed 300 Africans. Slave forts were attacked, as in the Christianborg revolt on the Gold Coast in 1727.

Once arrived, slaves escaped to form 'Maroon' communities in hills and swamps, existing for decades or more in a state of war with the European authorities. In Jamaica, the British were forced to recognise the Maroon settlements after a war in 1730, in return for promises that they would hand back runaways and not raid the plantations to increase their numbers. This treaty was rejected by part of the Maroon communities. The existence of these communities alongside slave plantations always gave others hope and undermined white pretensions to complete domination.

The first slave revolt in Jamaica in 1673 set the tone for a series of uprisings there and elsewhere, including 'Tacky's Rebellion' in 1760 which took six months to put down, a revolt in Dutch Guyana in 1763, in French Montserrat in 1766, and a failed plot in British Antigua in 1736.

Alongside this 'revolutionary' struggle was resistance that ameliorated slavery without ending it. Strikes or escapes took place for better conditions, food rations, or to protest or evade inhumane treatment. Feigning stupidity or illness, stealing and shirking allowed individual slaves to control their pace of work - turning the prejudices of their owners against them. Collectively, slaves could use conversion to Christianity - or the acceptance of a culture and religion of their own - to impose rest days or feast days as part of the local custom.

However, it was the French revolution - and its aftershock in Haiti - that sounded the death-knell for slavery, resulting in the second independent country in the Americas, the first to abolish slavery, and the first black republic. It was this, as much as religious belief or the industrial revolution that exposed slavery for the dying and anachronistic system that it was, and set the stage for Wilberforce, Clarkson and the Clapham Sect to win support for abolition.

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