

The Slave Trade

How the slave trade created racism - by Volker Börkewitz

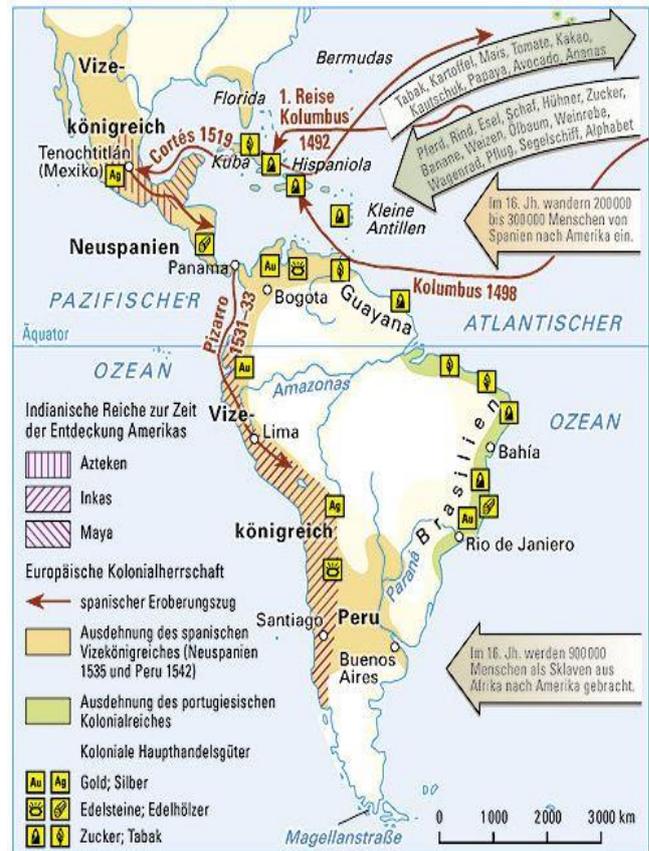
In the UNESCO-supported research project “The Slave Route”, the entrance states:

“The slave trade represents a dramatic interplay of history and geography. This four-hundred-year tragedy is one of the greatest inhumane undertakings in human history.”

Slavery and the slave trade have existed since the Egyptians, Romans and Greeks, and well before. However, the truly commercial exploitation of and trade in human beings only began in the 15th century by Europeans. Even before the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, the Portuguese advanced along the west coast of Africa towards India with their improved ships, the caravels and galleons. They shipped black slaves to Europe via a trading base on the Mauritanian coast. These were mainly house slaves, as was customary at the time. It was not until 1502 that slaves were needed in the New World of the West Indies and South America for the heavy work in the mines and on the plantations. The Spaniards had worn out the indigenous peoples of the Mayas, Aztecs and Incas, decimated them by hard work in the gold and silver mines and ultimately by introduced diseases such as smallpox.

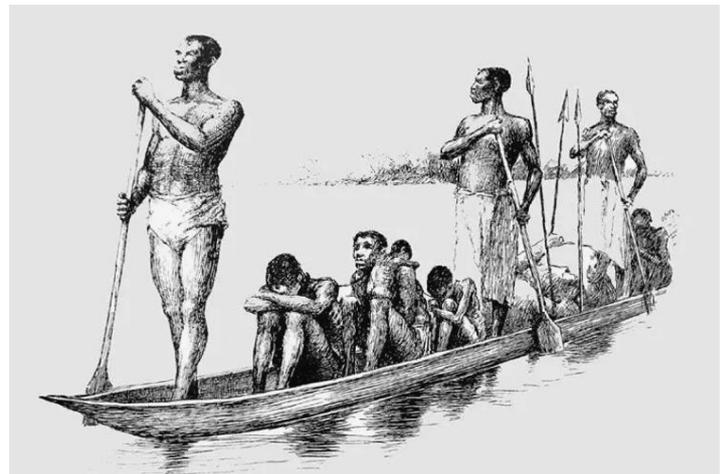
So, it made sense to expand the bases on the West African coast between Gambia and Angola in order to acquire labor slaves, men, but also women and children from the local African tribes for their mines and plantations on the other side of the Atlantic. Weapons, iron articles, fabrics of all kinds, brandy and many trifles that the African peoples found good for themselves served as objects of exchange. It was not uncommon for the European traders to meet tribal chiefs who confronted them in conspicuously colourful clothing, wearing turbans and also richly made up and adorned with pearls.

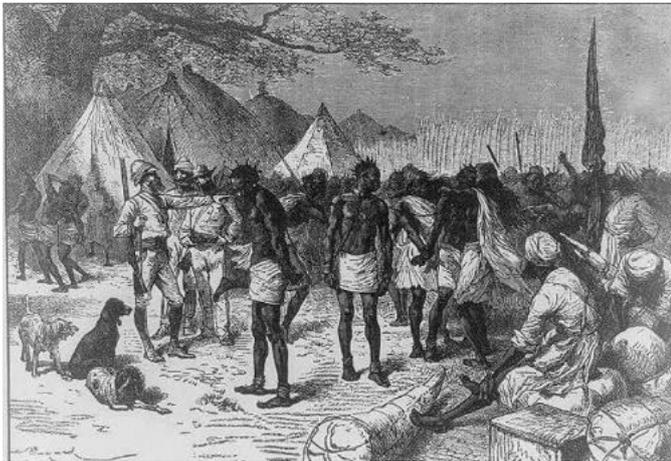
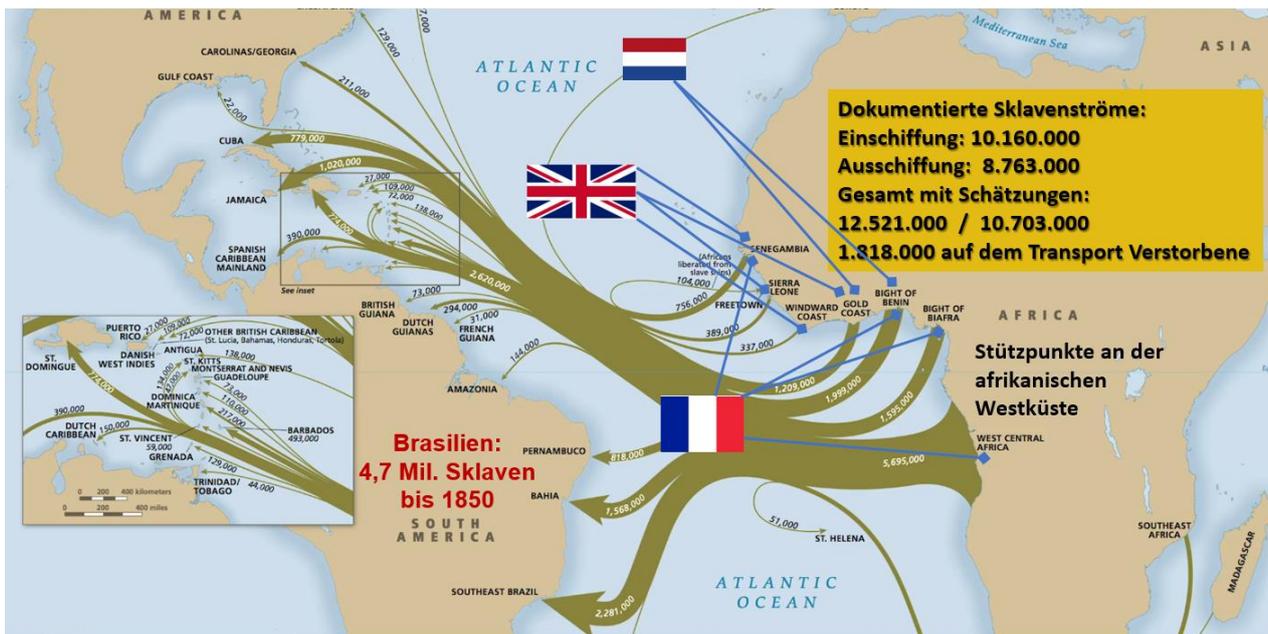
The Africans had no scruples whatsoever when it came to procuring slaves. The many different peoples who were at home in the mostly inaccessible jungle areas of West Africa fought each other constantly and made plenty of human booty in the process. Whereas before the slave trade it was customary to kill captives, these were now sold to the highest bidder in response to the Europeans' desire. The demand thus also aroused the desire for war. If the booty was too small, the despotic tribal lords also fell back on their own people. In addition, the whites acquired gold - mostly



in the form of gold dust - and ivory. The tusks of the elephants, which were hunted and killed in the cruellest way, were the materials for jewellery, art objects and inlays. The great slaughter took place in the interior of the country, far from the coast and invisible to European traders.

The demand for black slaves, who were valued by the white plantation owners for their robustness, was enormous. Everywhere in the New World, on the Caribbean islands like Cuba, Santo Domingo (today





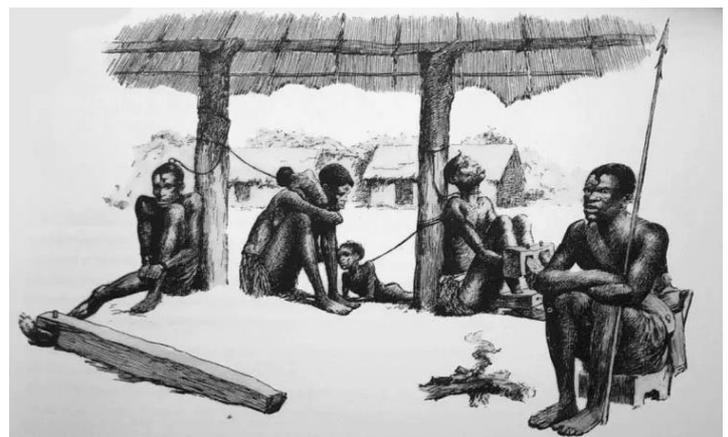
Haiti and Dominican Republic) many Antilles islands, Tobago, the east coast of South America (today Brazil, Guiana, Suriname) but also in the southern states on the east coast of North America the numbers increased year after year. During the period of settlement by the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, French and English, the trade in slaves from Africa across the Middle Passage of the Atlantic is estimated at 12.5 million. Of these, 10.2 million are documented. However, over 1.8 million slaves perished on the crossing. This trade, which lasted from 1520 to 1850, was the biggest money-making machine for the European nations involved.

The trade began in Europe. The trading centres were Liverpool, Bristol and London in England, Amsterdam, and Bordeaux, Nantes, La Rochelle and Le Havre in France. Portugal increasingly lost the upper hand, with England, France and the Netherlands taking over the main business.

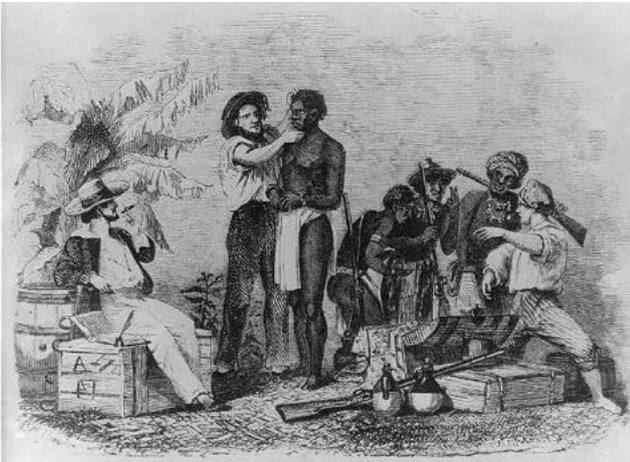
A “triangular trade” developed. The goods coveted by the Africans were brought to the coast of West

Africa. There, these goods were exchanged for slaves. The trade was lengthy, not infrequently lasting several months, and resulted in 400 to 800 slaves in exchange for European goods: men, women and children from the age of 8. Women and children provided the offspring on the plantations of America. The black goods were extensively examined by the European traders, often by doctors who travelled with them. The “goods” had to be flawless, strongly built and free of disease.

The black slaves were kept by their captors at the trading posts on the coast until European ships arrived. This “temporary storage” could last several weeks and involved great torture by being tied to trees and roof beams of the reed huts. Once the sampling and the trade per slave with the tribal lords was successfully completed, the “black goods” were transported by canoe to the ships waiting off the coast. Here the men, women and children were given cloths to cover their nakedness, because in the jungle people did not know any clothes. The doctor or helmsman gave them something to make them vomit, because the ordeal up to that point and the uncertainty of their fate had



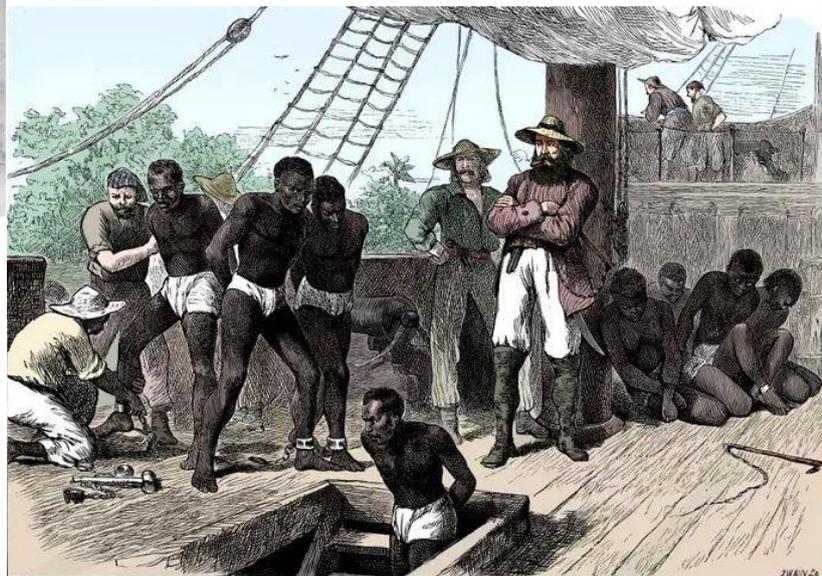
“turned their stomachs”. It is hard to imagine the people's fear of their future, as white faces were only known to them from tribal rituals in the worship of “white gods”. In addition, the inhabitants of Africa saw the sea for the first time.



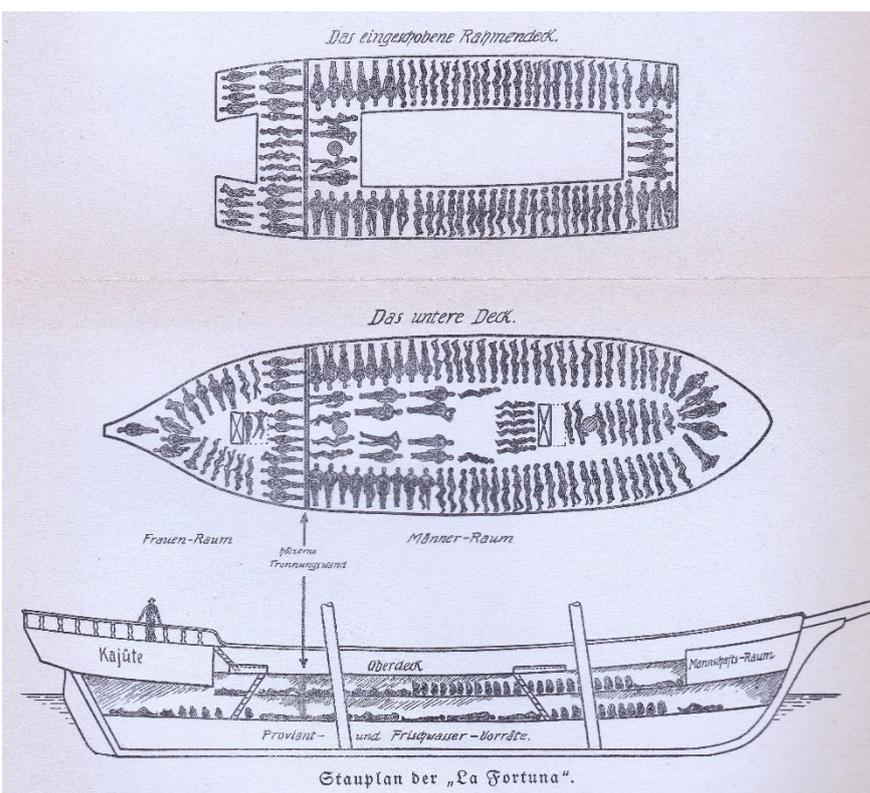
What followed was a procedure of shackling. The men were tied in pairs at the ankles with iron rings and riveted together with a bolt. Two men had to remain chained together in this way for up to 8 weeks, the length of a crossing, and sometimes longer. The women and children were not tied up, but the two groups were strictly separated from each other on the ship. Between the main deck and the quarterdeck, where the women and children were accommodated, there was a six-centimetre-thick wooden wall, the so-called barricade, which could not be overcome and ran across all decks. On top, this wall was equipped with iron pointed claws and

up to four “Drehbassen”, so-called revolving short-barrelled firearms, with which the slaves on deck could be kept at bay.

The ships were specially designed and equipped for the transport of many people and had three masts. The lower deck was used to store provisions for up to 800 people on ships no longer than 50 metres. In the tween deck along the outer wall, a frame deck was built as a platform so that the male slaves could lie on it and under it at night. Here, tightly packed on their sides and in pairs, it was not uncommon for up to 600 people



to live in a very confined space. The decks were only 170 centimetres high, and each slave had a bed width of 50 centimetres. Fresh air came from above, but only when the sea was calm. If the weather was stormy with seas coming over, the hatches had to be closed. If this period lasted too long, some of the slaves could then be handed over to the sea; many did not survive this torture. While the losses on the crossing were still high at the beginning of the slave journey due to a lack of knowledge about the conditions and the necessary supplies - the quantity and quality of the drinking water was always critical - in the course of the 18th century the loss rate per crossing developed to a maximum of 10 to 20 slaves. Only when epidemics broke out or the weather became extremely bad did the losses increase. It was only when the English entered the business and unscrupulous captains thought they were making a killing that the losses increased again, especially after the British Parliament banned the slave trade in 1808 with the Slave Trade Act.



William Turner – The Slavership (1840)



ivory and people, these were the goods from Africa to America. Gold, ivory and goods from the colonies were brought to Europe, to Liverpool, Bristol, Amsterdam, Nantes and Bordeaux. Sugar from the Caribbean islands and the east coast of South America was considered the gold of modern times, similar to salt in the Middle Ages. It was only with the cultivation of the sugar beet and its industrial processing in the mid-19th century that the importance of sugar cane diminished. Until then, however, rum could be distilled from the sugar cane molasses, which in turn was shipped to Africa as an object of exchange. This created a triangular trade.

The black slaves were sold by the ship owners on the slave markets of the Caribbean, e.g. the French Saint Domingue, today's Haiti, or on the Dutch island of Curacao. If the purchase price in Africa was between 100 and 150 Dutch guilders in the value of the goods brought home, whereby the value for negotiations was always set higher than the actual purchase price, the European obtained up to 800 guilders per slave from the plantation owners, and up to 1000 guilders in the period of illegal trade. The condition of the "goods" played a not insignificant role and sales practices

developed that held back the very good "commodities" so that they would not be the only ones to go and then have trouble selling the "rest". These were people!

There is little written evidence of the actual living conditions on the plantations and in the mines of America. One of them, Uncle Tom's Cabin, the novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe, was one of the motivations for Abraham Lincoln to abolish slavery in the United States by law. As is well known, this led to the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865. The victory of the Union states over the Southern states, the Confederates, ultimately cost Lincoln his life. France had already suspended the slave trade in 1794 with the end of the French Revolution, which Napoleon reintroduced in 1802. But with the victory over Napoleon and the British "Slave Trade Act" in force since 1808, the other European states involved in the slave trade were finally able to agree on a waiver at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. However, the time of implementation was not regulated and so the trade between Africa and America continued in the following years until 1860, partly legally, mostly illegally. As a result, the ships were stuffed full of black slaves so that at least a high profit could be made in the short time

available. Less value was also placed on the physical condition of the people when they were bought. It happened that out of 800 slaves travelling across the Atlantic, up to 350 lost their lives on the way.

All this could only happen because the time of the slave trade coincided with the time of the Enlightenment. This period from 1650 to 1800 sought to identify and establish a rationality in the world order. Thus, the different appearance of the peoples that had been discovered also came into the focus of the Enlightenment thinkers. One of them, Immanuel Kant from Königsberg (1724 - 1804), who was much respected at the time, published two writings on the human race. Following the general view that a hierarchical order prevails in our world, in which humans stand above the animals, Kant developed a logic according to the appearance and place of appearance of different groups of humans, which provoked an order of rank even within the human species. Thus, he placed the white European in the type "Nordic" in the first place in the order of precedence, as the ancestral species defined by him. This was followed by three other types in terms of appearance and their homeland: Copper Reds (Indians) from North America, Blacks from Senegambia and Olive Yellows (Indians) from the South American region.

Finally, the trade in African slaves and slavery also legalised their ancestral way of life and socialisation in the native tribes. The black peoples of Africa were regarded as uncultured savages without education and customs who did not conform to European ideas. Last but not least, the popular ethnological shows of the 18th and 19th centuries, which lasted in Germany until 1940, contributed to the spread of racism. In large and small cities in Europe and North America, African and indigenous inhabitants from South and North America were presented to the astonished public like a zoo show.

All this was always done on the basis of "economic efficiency"! Slaves were the plantation and mine owner's asset. With the prohibition of the transatlantic slave trade, not the trade among the colonies themselves, the owners received financial compensation from their governments, which was not insignificant. The human commodity was necessary as long as there was no mechanical substitute, or, using the example of cane sugar, it was replaced by the

cultivation of sugar beet in Europe. But there were other products that were in demand in Europe and were not cultivated here: Tobacco and cotton.

Finally, the question remains: What does it do to us that we confront people with a different appearance in such a way that racist behaviour becomes recognisable - thinking, saying, doing! Because most of us do not know the story described here. It is also irrelevant in



today's global society to justify our behaviour. It is the foreign and the fear of it that has been fomented in the media (social media first and foremost) and above all in our childhood upbringing. Instead of openly approaching people who only differ from us in appearance, we are first reserved, then curious - which is normal, fearful and finally rejecting. What is special is that these people are in the middle of our society, born and raised here, went to school and studied here. So, they are belonging to a nation, whatever their origin is, and should always be welcome as immigrants! And we, we still behave as if these our fellow citizens had just escaped from a genocide show?!

UNESCO's Slavery Route Project is now supposed to pursue precisely those goals that show the causes, the actions and the consequences of slavery. It aims to shed light on the global transformations and cultural interrelationships as a result of this history and to contribute to the emergence of a culture of peace by promoting inclusion, cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and the creation of new identities and civil societies.

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