



## Contents

Slavery.....	1
Transatlantic Slave Trade.....	3
Resistance and Rebellion .....	6
Slave Trade abolition. ....	8
Anti-slavery campaign.....	8
Abolition in Britain .....	8
Abolition in America .....	9
GICJ Position.....	10

# International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition

In resolution 29 C/40 during the 29<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) General Conference the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August of every year was proclaimed “International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition”. This was decided bearing in mind Black People’s Day that “invites the Director-General to provide moral and material assistance towards the organisation. Previous resolutions were also recalled such as, 27 C/Resolution 3.13 on the implementation of the intercultural and interregional project on the Slave route and 28 C/Resolution 5.11 on the Slave Route and international commemoration of the slave trade. Furthermore, member states are encouraged to mobilize their youth and communities of culture, art, education and science to give the day due distinction.

On this day, many actively participate in various artistic and educational ways and performances such as dance, music, and drama as an expression of resistance against slavery. Educators, governmental organisations, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) alike participate by provided information to the people about the historical events that are associated with the slave trade.

## Slavery

Slavery has existed since the beginning of civilizations where the growth of cultivation and warfare brought about injustices that allowed the unfortunate possibility to abduct and keep men, women and children as slaves for domestic, laborious, agricultural, entertainment, or sexual services. It should be noted that many despised slave-owning and attempts were made to free slaves, for instance, the Essenes and the Therapeutae<sup>1</sup>.

Slave trading, particularly in the Mediterranean region (around 1000 – 1500 CE) became big business and thousands of slaves served a variety of purposes and services. Since, slave trading bore no barriers and spread to other regions of the world.

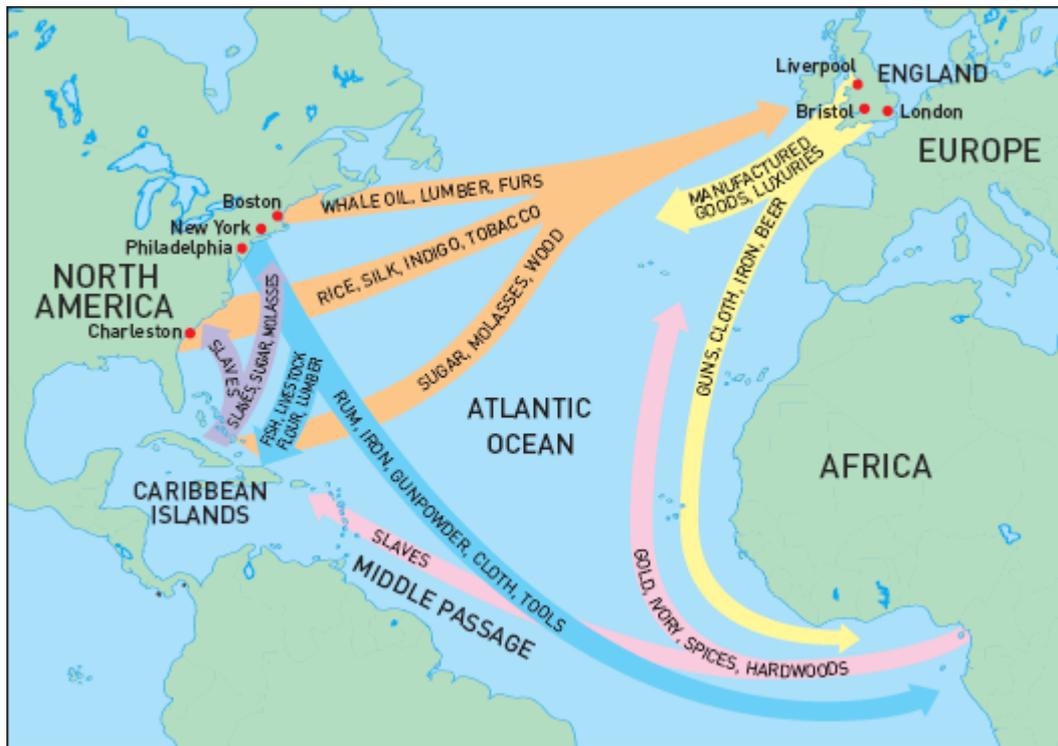
The Triangular trade was an international network linking the economies of the Americas, Africa, and Europe and transported approximately 25 to 30 million enslaved men, women, and children. The Transatlantic slave trade itself moved approximately 15 to 18 million captive slaves, excluding the millions that died en route, during wars, raids of capture, imprisonment in the barracoons, or forced march to the trading posts and assembly centres, and during the “Middle Passage” (transatlantic crossing); it was estimated that for every captive about five others died.

The triangular trade route began with ships leaving Western Europe with weapons, gun powder, beer and rum, textiles, and other such manufactured goods that would be traded for human beings. Next, the captured humans who were now slaves were shipped to the Americas where they would be sold throughout the continent. The last step involved the ships returning with agricultural products made by the captive slaves as well as cotton, sugar, wood, and tobacco among other products. The entire

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<sup>1</sup> <https://newint.org/features/2001/08/05/history/>

operation lasted approximately 18 months and the major trading countries were England, France, Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain.



This type of slavery became a “totalitarian system for economic, political, social and sexual exploitation, based on force, violence and an ideology of racism. A « dialectics of oppression », a system of social death to which it was possible to escape only by running away, manumission or death.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Europeans introduced a new form of slavery called Chattel slavery, in which, “the slave is treated as a piece of property, belonging to his or her owner, and has no rights; the slave is enslaved for life and his/her children are automatically enslaved too; chattel slaves can also be bought and sold just like cattle (from which the word chattel comes)”<sup>3</sup>.

### Code Noir

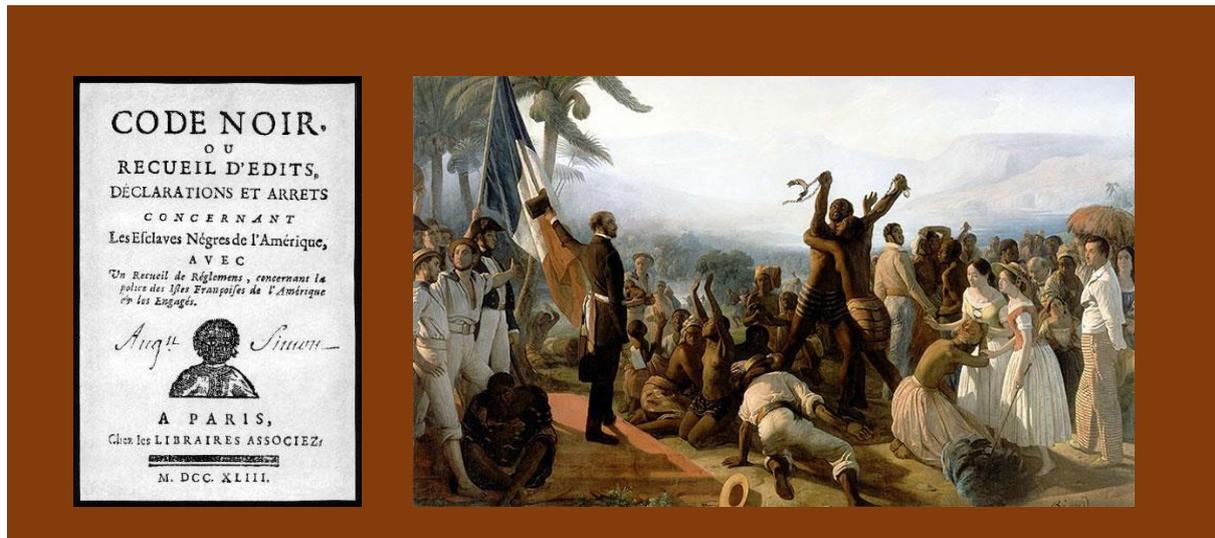
The Code Noir was a French edict by Louis XIV in 1685 that was devised to administer rules and duties on how the relationship between masters/slave owners and slaves (mainly people of African descent) should be governed. The Code Noir had provisions that ensured that the captive slaves by law had no rights and prohibited several conducts that could lead to their escape or freedom such as gatherings and/or assembly with other captive slaves with different masters. In addition, the ‘Code’ had horrifying punishments for retaliatory actions or for attempting to escape the life of slavery such as in Article XXXVIII:

*“The fugitive slave who has been on the run for one month from the day his master reported him to the police, shall have his ears cut off and shall be branded with a fleur de lys on one shoulder. If he commits the same infraction for another month, again counting from the day he is reported, he shall*

<sup>2</sup> Struggles Against Slavery: International Year to Commemorate the Struggle Against Slavery and its Abolition.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

have his hamstring cut and be branded with a fleur de lys on the other shoulder. The third time, he shall be put to death.”



Additionally, the following article punishes masters of free slaves who give refuge to fugitive slaves by way of fines. Other articles such as Article XLIV deems the human beings captured and put into slavery as “community property” and further lays out provisions and conditions of their purchase/sale. Even though the Code certifies that a freed slave shall enjoy the freedoms of ‘freeborn persons’ the manner in, which a slave becomes ‘free’ could only be through a formal declaration by the ‘master’, such as in a will<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, their treatment as ‘freed slaves’ is seriously questionable considering the victimization and stereotyping of black Africans as slaves.

## Transatlantic Slave Trade

Transatlantic trade began around the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century upon Portuguese conquest across the Atlantic Ocean, which was followed by the Spanish as well as Christopher Columbus’ Caribbean conquest.

However, the transatlantic slave trade was like no other, considering:

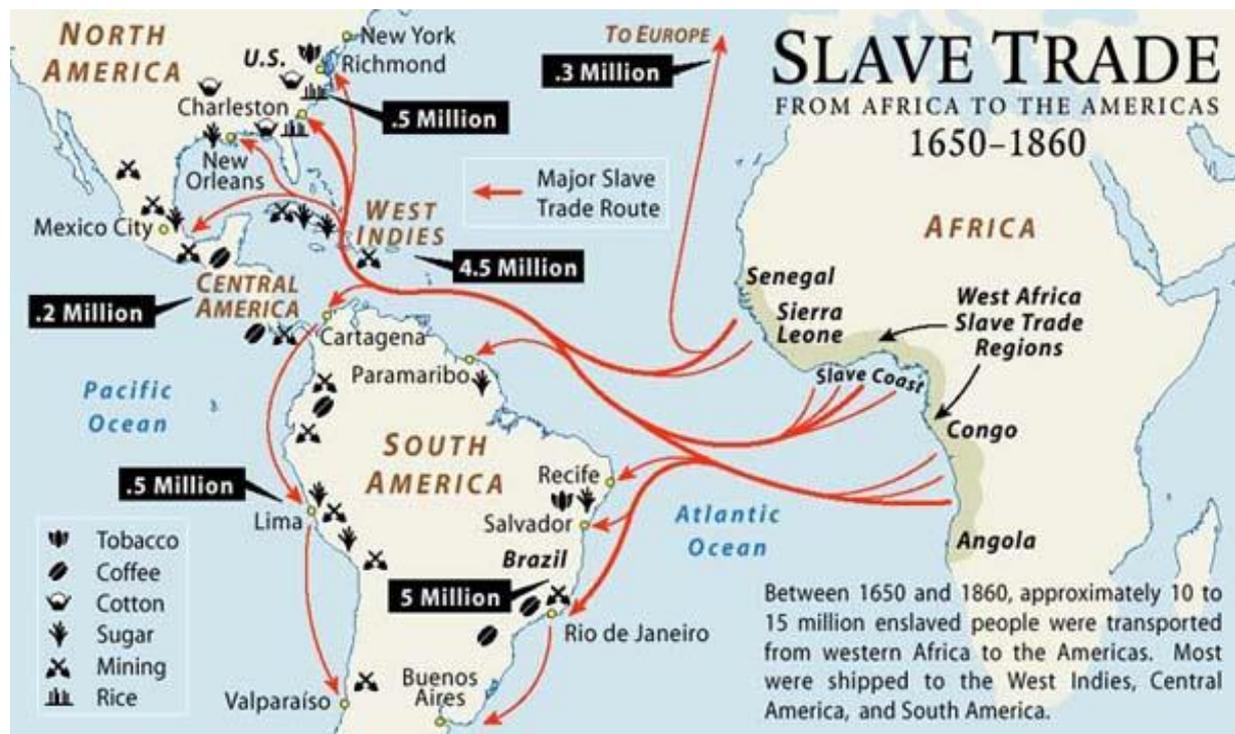
- 1.) its scale and duration,
- 2.) the victimization of slaves who were black African men, women, and children, and
- 3.) the “intellectual legitimization attempted on its behalf” consisting of an anti-black ideology and the legalization of such an organization.

Considered as the first “system of globalization” this particular slave trade covered Africa, the Americas, Europe, the Caribbean, and the Indian Ocean making it one of the largest deportations in history with significant world economic implications. Notwithstanding, it was also considered by

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<sup>4</sup> The Code Noir (The Black Code). 1685. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/335/>

many, such as French historian Jean-Michel Deveau, as one of “the greatest tragedies in the history of humanity in terms of scale and duration”<sup>5</sup>.



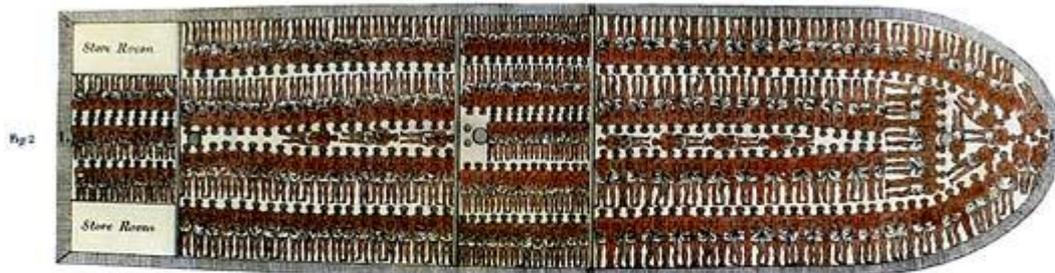
In the American colonies, Great Britain regulated the trading of African slaves from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century through the Navigation Act of 1660 that allowed only English ships to enter the colonial ports, additionally that same year the British government chartered the “Company of Royal Adventurers Trading to Africa”, a company that would be dissolved thanks to the war between Britain and the Netherlands but would again be revived in 1672 under the “Royal African Company” (RAC). The British government again granted special protection the RAC that would transport 5,000 captive slaves per year between 1680 – 1686. As demand for slaves grew the company lost its monopoly and in 1698 the average number of slaves imported by British ships grew to 20,000 per year and Britain became the world leader in trafficked captive slaves by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### *The Middle Passage*

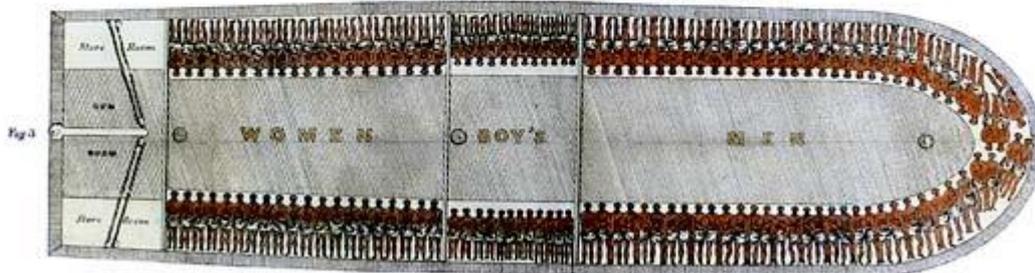
The Middle Passage was the journey from West Africa across the Atlantic Ocean to the West Indies lasting about three to four months. It would be one of the most arduous expeditions as it also served to erase the captive slave’s “sense of human dignity” as they were chained and shackled and forced to lay down in rows, “spoonways”, or on shelves across the ship. Furthermore, they were systematically dehumanized. Before boarding, the captives were stripped of any “physical connections” with their past and this would continue aboard the slave trading ships along the “Middle Passage”.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/slave-route/transatlantic-slave-trade/>

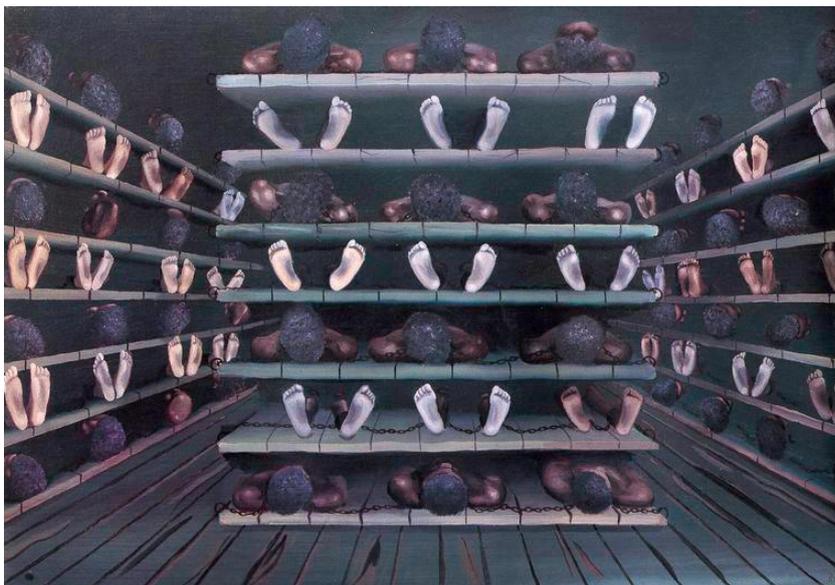
PLAN OF LOWER DECK WITH THE STOWAGE OF 292 SLAVES  
130 OF THESE BEING STOWED UNDER THE SHELVES AS SHEWN IN FIGURE 2 & FIGURE 3.



PLAN SHEWING THE STOWAGE OF 130 ADDITIONAL SLAVES ROUND THE WINGS OR SIDES OF THE LOWER DECK BY MEANS OF PLATFORMS OR SHELVES (IN THE MANNER OF GALLERIES IN A CHURCH) THE SLAVES STOWED ON THE SHELVES AND BELOW THEM HAVE ONLY A HEIGHT OF 2 FEET 7 INCHES BETWEEN THE BEAMS AND FAR LESS UNDER THE BEAMS. See Fig 2.



*“At last, when the ship we were in, had got in all her cargo, they made ready with many fearful noises, and we were all put under deck, so that we could not see how they managed the vessel. ... The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome.... The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died – thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers.” – Olaudah Equiano*



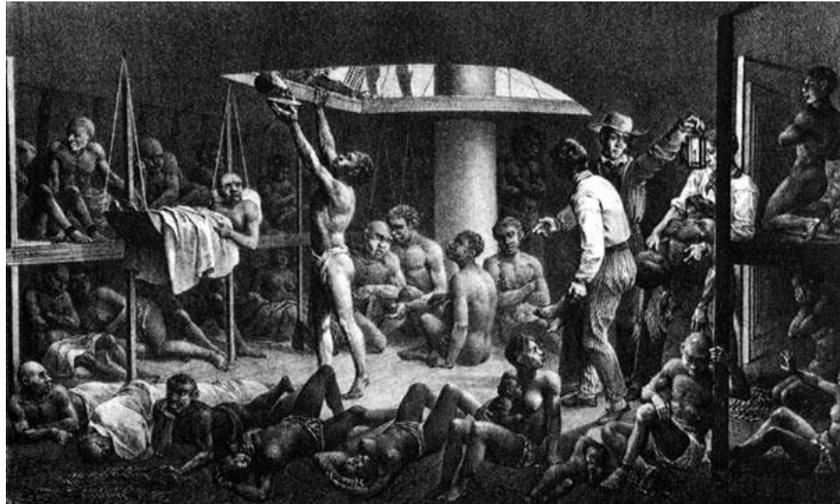
In such brutal and crowded conditions disease became rampant and spread even to the sailors and crew members. Scurvy, small pox, dysentery and other diseases were a result of the poor living and health conditions that also included blood, vomit, mucus, and diarrhoea. The captains would throw the sick people as well as anyone suspected of being ill overboard into the ocean. With such conditions and horror, let alone the

unknown future, as many suspected the Europeans captured and enslaved Africans to kill and eat them, suicide was not off the table but required strategy as slave owners prevented it as much as they could. For instance, a special contraption called a *speculum orum* was used to force feed captives who attempted to starve themselves to death.

Women, on the other hand were allowed more freedom and sometimes journeyed on deck but they nonetheless bore a double burden as they were brutally raped and sexually abused throughout the journey. However, they played an important role in mutiny against the slave owners as they were given more liberty to move about thus giving them the opportunity to organize.

Despite attempts by the captain to keep as many African-slaves as possible, mortality rates were high.

After the captive slaves were sold in the Americas they were put to labor “for the exploitation of mines and plantations of sugar cane, tobacco, coffee and cotton”<sup>6</sup>. In the sugar cane plantations in the Caribbean life expectancy for the slave laborers was only five to six years and millions more were continually enslaved and trafficked over decades.



## Resistance and Rebellion

It is without a doubt that Africans would resist the slave trade, slavery and forced labour from the very beginning by any means possible. Strategic defences such as moving communities to areas surrounded by hills, barricading villages with fences and poisoned bushes, and mazes to confuse slave traders amongst others were utilised. There was also violent and non-violent means of resistance against Europeans mainly by Africans. This was duly noted by slave traders, captains and crewmen of slave trading ships, doctors, and even slave masters who described them as “lazy and ill-disposed to labour”. Some “open and violent” means of resistance included the “poisoning of animals and owners, and sometimes turned it against themselves by committing infanticide, self-mutilation and suicide... absent themselves from enslavement for a few hours or a few days, regardless of the punishment they might receive on their return”<sup>7</sup>. Whereas non-violent means included, sabotage, conspiring and forming maroon communities; freed people “petitioned authorities, led information campaigns, and worked actively to abolish the slave trade and slavery”. Additionally, “black abolitionists launched or participated in civic movements... delivered speeches, provided information, wrote newspapers,

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<sup>6</sup> <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001337/133738e.pdf#page=9>

<sup>7</sup> Resistance and Rebellion. [http://www.understandingslavery.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=310\\_resistance-and-rebellion&catid=125\\_themes&Itemid=222.html](http://www.understandingslavery.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=310_resistance-and-rebellion&catid=125_themes&Itemid=222.html)

articles, and books. Such resistance, however, has often been overlooked, underestimated, and/or forgotten.

African rulers such as Queen Nzinga Bandi (c. 1583 – 1663) launched resistance campaigns against the slave trade and with the help of alliances fought against the Portuguese who controlled parts of what is now Angola. King Agaja Trudo of Dahomey (c. 1708-40) not only banned slave trading but also attacked European forts along the coast. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Muslim states in West Africa were also opposed to the slave trade and banned human trafficking. For instance, Abd al-Qadir (Abdel Kader Kane) a religious leader Futa Jallon (current day Guinea) threatened British slave traders that death would be the result of anyone who tried to acquire slaves from his country.



*Left: Queen Nzinga Bandi, Right: Muslim leader Abdel Kader Kane*

There was also rebellion in the “middle passage” (the journey from West Africa across the Atlantic to the Americas and Caribbean) as Africans battled to the European crew and tried to gain control of the ships. The most famous example is that of the Amistad in 1839, in which Africans bound for Cuba aboard the Spanish ship, “Amistad”, broke free, and took control of the ship. Even though the original plan was to head back to Africa the sailors re-directed the ship to America where fortunately a trial took place where the courts found the Africans to have been captured and enslaved illegally and were thus determined “free-persons”. Other noteworthy rebellions and resistance campaigns were Tacky’s rebellion in 1960s Jamaica, Fedon’s 1790s revolution in Grenada, 1816 Barbados slave revolt by Bussa, and the 1831 slave revolt in Jamaica led by Sam Sharpe.

## Slave Trade abolition.

### *Anti-slavery campaign*

The anti-slavery campaign in the British Empire took 20 years to come into effect because even though the slave trade industry together with the transatlantic slave trade was an enormous industry not everyone was aware of the operations and conditions that made it particularly horrifying. Information was not widespread as many in Europe were illiterate. On top of little information about the slave

trade and its atrocities in circulation, there were not many opportunities that common folk could pursue or entertain to make effective change at that time; additionally, women were not given a voice and they could not vote and those in power had little interest in what the people had to say. Furthermore, the elites who were aware of the wickedness of slavery had the money and power to influence the government but they profited very well from the slave trade and became too comfortable in their ways of living to want any change.



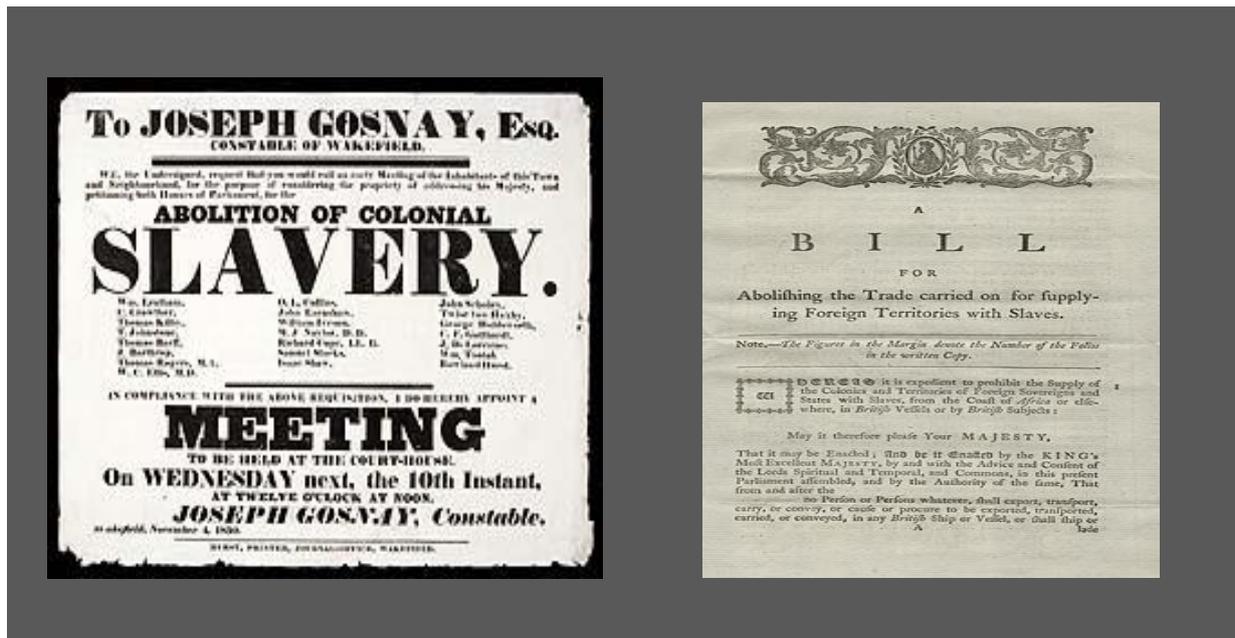
“Am I not a man and a brother”, “Am I not a woman and a sister” abolitionist emblems designed by mater potter committed supporter of the abolition cause, Josiah Wedgewood.

### *Abolition in Britain*

These set-backs delayed the campaign to abolish the slave trade by the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade but was nonetheless launched. The campaign concentrated on pressuring Parliament to abolish the trading of slaves itself as they believed it to be a tactical strategy that would eventually lead to the eradication of slavery. Additionally, abolitionists raised awareness through different means and tactics such as the arts, which together with the campaign had significant impacts on Parliament to do something about the slave trade. Though majority of the successive abolition was due to the

slave rebellion and revolution in Haiti the campaign and tactics of the abolitionists raised significant public awareness about the truth of the slave trade and slavery.

The act itself pertained to the British colonies and British ships which were then banned from carrying any slaves. Many, obviously attempted to evade the ban and while the ultimate goal for the abolition of slave trade was to eventually eliminate slavery it became evident that this would not be the case. Thus in 1823 the ‘Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery’ came into being.



### Abolition in America

The increasing number of African-born slaves worried the leaders of South Carolina who would impose a “special tax on foreign slaves to slow the trade” as legislature noted that their growing numbers “may prove of the most dangerous consequence”. Virginia also attempted to ban slave trading for purely economic reasons but was overruled as the RAC had powerful advocates in the government and the slave trade was crucial to the British economy<sup>8</sup>.

The ban on slave trade by the colonists was their attempt at cutting economic ties with Britain and during the Revolution all of the new states either suspended or banned the slave trading. However, some of the northern colonies also banned the African slave trade for moral reasons as well. As opposition to slavery grew more and more states would ban the trade entirely such as Massachusetts and New Hampshire followed by a gradual ban in Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. During and after the Revolution slave trading was deliberated and in some instances banned bringing freedom to slaves (where some remained free and others re-enslaved to the British Caribbean) based on economic and political reasons but not on moral reasons.

<sup>8</sup> The Abolition of the Slave Trade. [http://abolition.nypl.org/essays/us\\_constitution/](http://abolition.nypl.org/essays/us_constitution/)

The Abolition Act of 1807 finally came into force and was exercised in 1808. However, many slave traders continued trafficking and selling human beings from Africa to parts of the Americas and especially the Caribbean by way of illegal smuggling and disguising their ships. It would take another 40 to 60 years to end the transatlantic slave trade.

## GICJ Position

While Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ) on this day commemorates the brave struggle of the captive slaves and pays special tribute to the many unsung brave women and men who assembled to free themselves and others from slavery we also call for the recognition of the atrocities and struggle endured by the captive slaves and also call for redress and compensation for the monumental loss of lives and property that is still felt today in the regions of Africa, the West Indies and the Caribbean, and the Americas. To this end, more attention must be given to the international decade for people of African descent and the African diaspora; as well, the United Nations and the international community must pay more attention to and implement the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.

Additionally, the abolitionists around the world who used various forms of protest, such as artistic works, to bring about public awareness of the true atrocities African slaves endured during the transatlantic slave trade and the conditions of slavery that followed should be acknowledged. In this regard, emphasis must be put on the right to freedom of assembly as it serves to raise public awareness and for people to gather and discuss common and serious issues.

GICJ strongly and fully condemns all forms of slavery and human trafficking and is concerned of the unfortunate modern-day slavery, which is a serious crime against humanity. In many regions of the world men, women, and children are being trafficked and sold off into slavery, more commonly known as forced labour.



