

A Brief History Of Slavery

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Slavery

History

Human Rights

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Origins

Slavery began with civilization. For hunter-gatherers slaves would have been an unaffordable luxury – there wouldn't have been enough food to go round. With the growth of cultivation, those defeated in warfare could be taken as slaves.

Western slavery goes back 10,000 years to Mesopotamia, today's Iraq, where a male slave was worth an orchard of date palms. Female slaves were called on for sexual services, gaining freedom only when their masters died.

Advert

Early abolitionists arose in the form of two Jewish sects, the Essenes and the Therapeutae, who abhorred slave-owning and tried buying slaves in order to free them.

Greece

The ancient Greeks preferred women and children as slaves for domestic work rather than rebellious men who were simply slaughtered. Any child born to slave women thus had a father who was free – a status that was also conferred upon them. With the



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growth of the Greek city states and the commercial production of cotton the demand for agricultural slaves grew, leading to an increase in warfare. In the fifth century BC, Athens had more slaves than free citizens.



Rome

The Roman Empire sprawled across the entire Mediterranean region and slave trading was big business. Slaves were trained for all possible functions, with gladiators fighting to the death for public entertainment at the extreme end. The Roman emperors owned thousands of slaves to indulge their every whim. They acted as clerks, secretaries and even tax agents. Thousands were worked to death mining gold and silver for the Empire. Plantation slavery began in Rome in the second century BC. Sicily witnessed a series of slave revolts, culminating in the great uprising led by Spartacus. When it was finally crushed, 6,000 slaves were crucified all along the Appian way from Rome to Capua.

Advert

Medieval Europe

In the early Middle Ages the Church condoned slavery – opposing it only when Christians were enslaved by ‘infidels’. Vikings raided Britain from 800 AD and sold their captives to markets in Istanbul and Islamic Spain. Religion was no barrier to the slave trade – Christians,



Muslims and Jews all partook. The Black Death – a plague epidemic – made demand for domestic slaves soar in Italy. Slaves were often suspected of poisoning their masters and punishments were dire. One accused had her flesh torn off by hot pincers as

she was drawn through the streets of Florence. In the 16th century Pope Paul III tried to stem Protestantism by threatening those who left the Catholic Church with enslavement.

The transatlantic trade

The Portuguese inaugurated the Atlantic slave trade, soon to be joined by the Spanish. Christopher Columbus' conquest of the Caribbean virtually wiped out the indigenous culture. Before long other colonial nations had poured into the Americas to plunder them. Slave labour produced sugar, cotton and tobacco. With the Indians dying out, African slaves were imported – 900,000 had landed by 1600. The African nations that supplied the slaves had a long history of slavery themselves. European colonists flocked to West Africa trading liquor, tobacco, arms and trinkets for live cargo.

Thus began the notorious Middle Passage where slaves would be loaded lying down in the holds of ships, often on their sides to preserve space. The British were the prime slavers, bringing goods from England to exchange for African slaves whom they then supplied to Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the New World. This triangular trade built Britain's fortune.

Slaves to sugar

Sugar was the mainstay of slavery in Brazil, Cuba and Haiti. In Brazil the Portuguese resisted installing even the most basic machinery to replace human labour; they worked their slaves to death within a span of a few years. Numerous African slaves escaped to the Brazilian interior, forming their own Republic of Palmares in a famous revolt which lasted 70 years. In 1696 when Palmares fell, all the leaders committed suicide rather than be enslaved again. Haiti, under French dominance, was importing 40,000 slaves a year when the fuse for a spectacular revolt was lit. Toussaint L'Ouverture took charge, forcing an abolitionist decree through the French Assembly and becoming the first black man to govern a European colony. Eventually under Napoleon's despotic reign, Toussaint was toppled by one of his own supporters. But Haiti gained freedom rather than returning to slavery.

Photo: **Anti-Slavery International**



Abolitionist moves

The 18th century saw the birth of abolitionist groups in the Western world. In 1804 the Danes made the slave trade illegal; Britain followed in 1807 and the Americans a year later. Anti-Slavery International was founded in 1839 a few years before the complete abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. But slave smuggling and slavery itself continued. The economic climate was changing – Britain's industries, built on the profits of plantation slavery, now sought a labour force closer to home.

The US

Slaves helped America win freedom from the British during the American War of Independence, without, however, gaining their own. The slogan, 'All men are created equal' had a hollow ring when even Thomas Jefferson who wrote it owned slaves. The invention of the cotton gin revolutionized the American South's fortunes – in 1860 a cotton harvest worth \$200 million was picked by slaves working under the lash. Slaves did every imaginable job that their masters saw fit, with skilled slaves being hired out for further profit. Fugitives escaped under cover of night travelling over wild terrain to the Northern states and Canada – their routes became known as the Underground Railroad. The Civil War in 1861 was the death knell of American slavery – over 38,000 black people died fighting in it. The 13th Amendment to the US Constitution abolished slavery.

Photo:
**Anti-
Slavery
Internati
onal**



A global menace

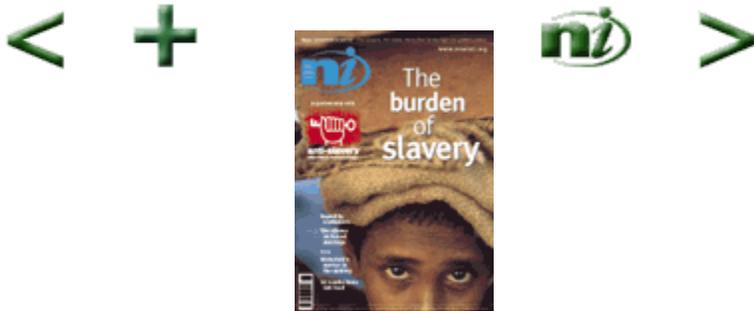
Slavery continued, however, in other parts of the world following emancipation in North America. Indigenous slavery in sub-Saharan Africa, debt bondage and forced labour in European colonies and domestic slavery in Nigeria and the Indian sub-continent thrived. Nine million lost their lives to forced labour and genocide in the Belgian Congo. In China a system of child slavery known as *Mui Tsai*, where children were sold for domestic work, persisted until the second half of the 20th century. In Peru atrocities committed by a British-registered company against the indigenous Indians enslaved to tap rubber led to boycotts. It was estimated that every ton of latex produced by the Peruvian Amazon Company had cost seven lives.

The long shadow

With the formation of the United Nations every member state was obliged to outlaw slavery – at least in principle. But past slavery throws a long shadow, as evidenced by various movements for reparations. In the US reparations for slavery have sparked heated debate. And recently Mary Robinson, the outgoing UN high commissioner for human rights, responded positively to suggestions of development aid for African countries from which slaves were taken by Europeans. In Aotearoa/New Zealand an independent tribunal recommended that the government compensate the descendants of Moriori people who were enslaved by the Maori over 150 years ago.

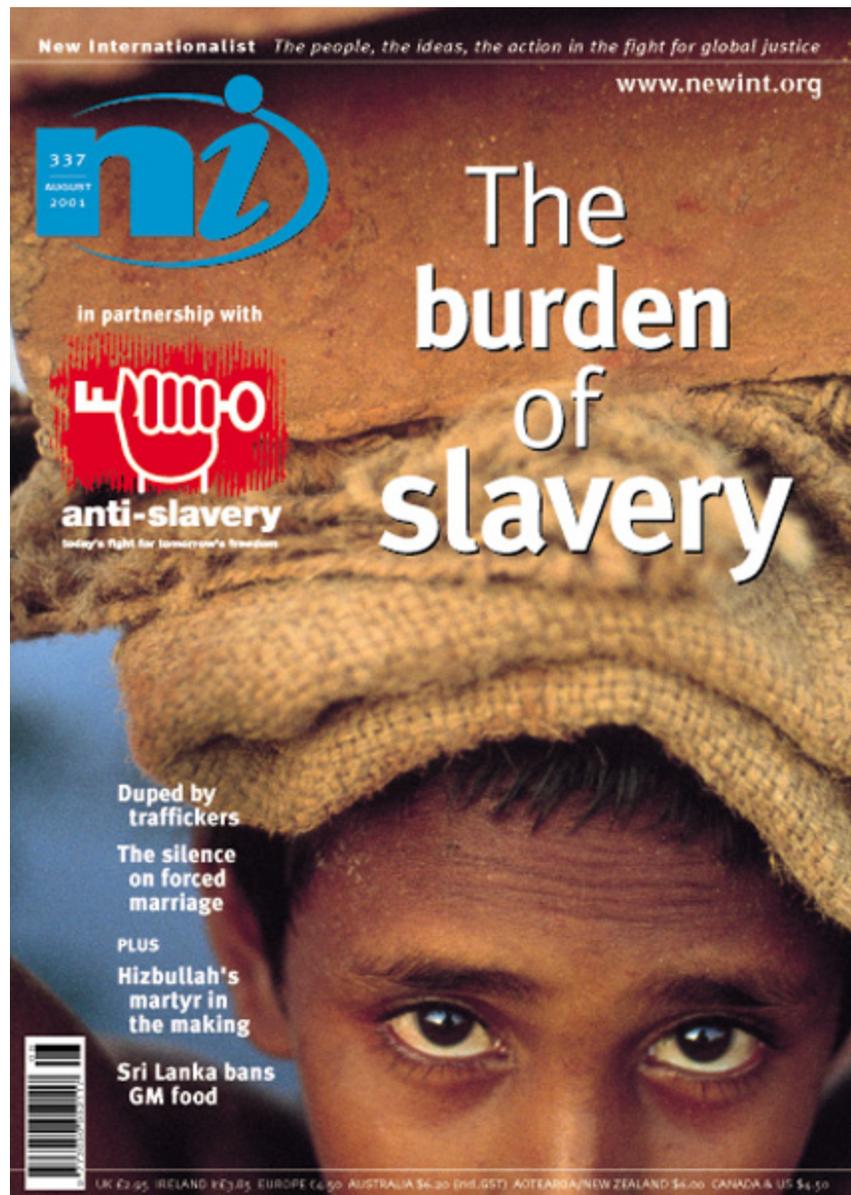
What's in a name?

- . Aristotle called slaves 'human instruments' signifying their use as tools.
- . Fifth-century Anglo-Saxons called their slaves 'Welshman', after the people they captured.
- . The word 'slave' is adapted from Slav, originating from the time when the Germans supplied the slave markets of Europe with captured Slavs.



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