



Transatlantic Migration Patterns: The Voluntary and Involuntary Movement of People

By Burleigh Hendrickson

The first movements of large groups of people across the Atlantic Ocean had numerous causes. Migrants were escaping religious and political persecution. Imperialistic nations were competing economically. Forced migration drove convicts and enslaved laborers. Whatever the reason, migration from Africa and Eurasia to the New World increased significantly beginning in the late 1400s.

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Migration Patterns and Early Global Economies

In the late 1400s, people began to migrate from Europe, Africa, and Asia to the Americas. This is sometimes referred to as the transatlantic migration. Some groups chose to migrate, while other groups were forced. The start of transatlantic migration changed the course of history. What factors explain this new movement of people? And what caused them to travel such great distances?

The migration to the Americas was the result of competition between European empires. European countries such as Spain and Portugal built empires in the Americas. There, Europeans came across indigenous people. Often, the two groups fought each other. Indigenous people had been isolated until this time, but now they faced empires that wanted their resources. The newcomers also brought new diseases. Smallpox wiped out millions of indigenous people.

Transatlantic migration had multiple causes. The decline of the indigenous population partly led to the rise of transatlantic migration. Another factor was the religious reformations that took place in Europe known as the Reformation. A third reason was the creation of the sugar plantation system in the Americas and a need for laborers.

Voluntary transatlantic migration and the European Reformation

What makes people leave one place for another? It is often in search of work and opportunity. This is called voluntary migration. Other times, people are forced to migrate. This is the case for enslaved populations, such as Africans brought to the New World as slaves.

In the 1500s and 1600s, Europe was experiencing religious conflicts. Many Europeans moved to the New World around this time for religious freedom. In the 1500s, religious groups broke away from the Catholic Church. These people became known as Protestants. The split from the Catholic Church was called the Protestant Reformation. New religious ideas divided communities and led to wars. Many Protestants left to find peace in the New World. In the 1630s and 1640s, 20,000 Protestants fled for English colonies in the New World. This group was known as the Puritans.

Along with religious freedom, some Europeans chose to migrate to escape poverty. But voluntary migrants only made up about 1 out of every 5 migrants. Most migrants in the 1700s and early 1800s were captive West and Central Africans. Voluntary migrants were always treated far better than captive Africans. Their journey could also be very dangerous. A migrant who reached the Americas had a 25 percent chance of dying in their first year due to disease. Some were sold into indentured servitude. This meant they had to work to “earn” their freedom.

Forced transatlantic migration and the role of the plantation system

The slave trade began to end in the early 1800s. Forced migration peaked from 1760 to 1820. During that time, almost 5 million enslaved Africans were forced to make the dangerous journey to the New World.¹ This was known as the “Middle Passage.” British and Portuguese slave traders brought Africans to the coasts of the Americas and the Caribbean. Most enslaved Africans were forced to farm sugar cane. They might also farm crops such as coffee, cotton, tobacco, and rice.

¹ Note: over 12 million enslaved Africans set sail from Africa to the Americas from the early sixteenth century through the nineteenth century. Ten million survived the horrific journey across the Middle Passage. Statistics compiled from Eltis, David, et al. *Slave Voyages*. Emory University, 2019, version 2.2.10, www.slavevoyages.org.

"I do not know if coffee and sugar are essential to the happiness of Europe, but I know well that these two products have accounted for the unhappiness of two great regions of the world: America has been depopulated to have land on which to plant them; Africa has been depopulated so as to have the people to cultivate them."

- J.H. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1773)

The Portuguese established early sugar colonies in Brazil. The Spanish did the same in Cuba. The British built wealthy plantations on islands, such as Jamaica. France then established the successful Saint-Domingue colony. Today, Saint-Domingue is known as Haiti.

Cutting sugar cane was physically difficult. Much of the indigenous population had died from disease, forced labor, and war. Plantation owners then enslaved African men. European convicts and prisoners of war could also avoid death sentences by migrating. Enslaved women and children were more likely to become domestic servants or work on tobacco farms. But male migrants still outnumbered women by 2.5 to 1.

Africans were forced to form new communities in the Americas. They could only socialize in the evening or on Sundays. They might journey as far as 4 or 5 miles by foot to meet up with Africans who spoke their language. Second-generation enslaved Africans developed new ways to communicate. They combined African and European cultures and languages. But fears of uprisings led slave-owners to limit the movement of enslaved Africans. Large groups of enslaved people were forbidden from gathering. It became challenging to have families. Yet, racial mixing did occur. Eventually, mixed or Creole communities emerged.

Many enslaved Africans died on the Middle Passage. Others died because of harsh working conditions on the plantations. This increased the demand for enslaved laborers. William Blake's illustration above shows the networks between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The Americas supplied land for valuable products, such as sugar and coffee. Africa provided enslaved labor to grow the crops. Europe made money from producing, distributing, and using these products.



Illustration from the late eighteenth century by William Blake, "Europe Supported By Africa and America," depicting enslaved populations supporting Europe. By William Blake, public domain.



Illustration of enslaved African laborers cutting sugar cane in British Antigua, 1823. By William Clark, public domain.

By the 1800s, the cost of sugar had gone down significantly. This was because of transatlantic migration. Even working-class Europeans could now buy sugar for their coffee and tea. The image above shows African and American contributions to the new European industrial economy.

New communities of industrial workers appeared in Europe in the 1800s. However, the slave trade divided communities in West and Central Africa. New multicultural communities emerged in the New World.

The Abolition of the Slave Trade and New Patterns of Voluntary Migration

Transatlantic migration transformed with the abolition of the slave trade. Britain ended its involvement in the slave trade in 1807. Other nations soon followed. Staple crop and industrial activities took off in the mid-1800s. Plantation owners and industrialists turned to voluntary workers. These new workers were mostly European and Asian migrants.

Migrants had different reasons for crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Many were enslaved and forced to work. Some chose to migrate for new opportunities or freedoms. Nevertheless, all migrants faced harsh conditions and discrimination in the New World.

Sources

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Image credits

Cover: View of the city of The Cap francais (Cap de la Republique), sea view in Saint Domingue. Detail. Painting by Louis-Nicolas Van Blarenbergh (1716-1794), 1779. New World Museum, La Rochelle, France © Photo by Leemage/Corbis via Getty Images

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Illustration of enslaved African laborers cutting sugar cane in British Antigua, 1823. By William Clark, public domain. <https://www.bl.uk/west-india-regiment/articles/an-introduction-to-the-caribbean-empire-and-slavery>



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