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THE ATONEMENT COMPLEX

Reparations, the imperial balance sheet and the strategic cost of British guilt

Doug Stokes
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About the author

Doug Stokes is a Professor of International Relations and an adviser on geopolitics and public policy. He is Vice President for Institutional Development and Head of the School of International Relations at Modul University Vienna, and Honorary Professor at the University of Exeter.

His work on international security has informed advisory roles at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), the Prosperity Institute, and the Council on Geostrategy, where he has counselled political and business leaders across Europe and North America. He publishes with leading university presses, and his latest book, *Against Decolonisation: The Campus Culture Wars and the Decline of the West,* was nominated for the *Times Literary Supplement* Book of the Year. He writes regularly for the British and European press.

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Summary

- An “atonement complex” has gripped much of contemporary British society. This comprises networks of academics, activists, government officials, religious institutions, and so on, who work from the premise that British prosperity is rooted in the crime of slavery for which Britain has never paid.

- The dynamics of slavery are complex. While it enriched small groups of Britons, it did not enrich the nation. The best evidence from recent work suggests at most a gain of a decade’s worth of income growth per capita, concentrated in places like Lancashire.

- Ending slavery was expensive. Suppression of the slave trade cost 1.8% of national income a year, for sixty years. Freedom for slaves in 1833 was purchased at the price of twenty million pounds and five thousand lives; taxpayer money was used to pay a small class of slaveholders to secure this freedom.

- Estimates of reparations owed for slavery- such as the Brattle Group’s figure of £18.8 trillion- are flawed. They are in essence personal-injury damages assumed to compound over centuries. It exceeds the entirety of UK net wealth, and treats the price paid to end slavery in 1833 as a debt still owed.

- Britain was one participant in the slave trade, among many. African states such as Dahomey and Sokoto thrived on the trade, and the Ottoman Empire ran one of the world’s longest-running slaveholding operations into the

twentieth century. What distinguishes Britain is its conscious role in ending the slave trade.

- The atonement complex has allowed hostile regimes internationally to use Western guilt over slavery as a tool of statecraft, often while deflecting scrutiny of their own conduct regarding slavery.

Introduction

On 30 July 2026, Sarah Mullally, the first woman to hold the office of Archbishop of Canterbury, stood at Cape Coast Castle in Ghana and prayed 'in lament for the Church's involvement in the slave trade'.[1] She also reaffirmed the Church of England's commitment to Project Spire, a £100 million fund for communities 'affected by historic slavery'. The Church Commissioners had announced the fund in January 2023, after research claimed that Queen Anne's Bounty, an eighteenth-century fund for poor clergy, had profited from investments in the slave-trading South Sea Company. A Church Oversight Group promptly judged the £100 million 'insufficient' and set a target of £1 billion for a 'Fund for Healing, Repair and Justice'.

Similarly, Jamaica's culture minister, Olivia Grange, lodged a petition at Buckingham Palace on 7 September asking King Charles, as Jamaica's head of state, to refer three questions to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council: whether the forced transport of Africans to Jamaica constituted a crime against humanity, whether it was lawful and whether the United Kingdom is obliged to provide financial restitution. She argued that Jamaica has 'inherited systems that continue

1 Eromo Egbejule, 'Archbishop of Canterbury vows to support £100m pledge helping communities affected by enslavement', *The Guardian*, 31 July 2026 (https://www.theguardian.com/news/2026/jul/31/archbishop-of-canterbury-support-pledge-helping-communities-enslavement).

to deprive our country and our people'.[2] On 22 September, Jamaica announced that the King had referred all three questions to the Judicial Committee. Jamaica's attorney general is preparing the case, and the CARICOM Reparations Commission has agreed on an action plan with legal options should Britain decline to negotiate.[3]

In November, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting convenes in St John's, Antigua, where CARICOM leaders agreed in July that the reparations campaign should have what they called a prominent presence. Barbados's Prime Minister Mia Mottley argued that we 'are not asking for charity. We are asking for justice, and history itself has already told the truth'.[4] Ralph Gonsalves, the principal architect of the CARICOM Reparations Commission, warned that it would be 'incredibly damaging' to the Commonwealth if Britain's new prime minister stays away.[5] Within months of taking office, Andy Burnham must therefore decide whether to attend a summit at which his hosts intend to present a bill.

2 Natricia Duncan, 'Jamaican delegates arrive in UK to hand slavery reparations petition to King Charles', *The Guardian*, 6 September 2026 (https://www.theguardian.com/news/2026/sep/06/jamaica-slavery-reparations-petition-king-charles).

3 Natricia Duncan, 'Jamaica hails King's decision to refer slavery reparations petition to privy council as "really big deal"' *The Guardian*, 23 September 2026 (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/sep/23/jamaica-king-charles-to-refer-slavery-reparations-petition-to-privy-council).

4 'Barbados leader rejects "asinine" claim by former UK minister that ex-colonies should repay Britain', *The Independent*, 10 July 2026 (https://www.independent.co.uk/news/mia-mottley-caribbean-suella-braverman-barbados-puerto-rico-b3012782.html).

5 Jim Pickard and Joe Daniels, 'Burnham urged not to snub commonwealth summit amid reparations demands', *Financial Times*, 10 September 2026 (https://www.ft.com/content/92a1f269-2832-4bcd-aad6-629fd86dda0f?syn-25a6b1a6=1).

Nor are the sums symbolic. The Brattle Group, the consultancy commissioned to quantify the claim, has put Britain's liability at £18.8 trillion, roughly seven times the country's annual national output.

The Church fund, the Jamaican petition and the summit choreography are not separate stories. In this report, I argue that they form what I call *an atonement complex:* an interlocking system of churches, activist networks, academic programmes, cultural institutions, sympathetic parliamentarians and, latterly, foreign governments, organised around the premise that Britain's wealth and standing rest on inherited and unexpiated crime.[6] I argue that the atonement complex exemplifies a more general malaise across the institutions of the West: a reflexive guilt in which the transatlantic slave trade functions as an original sin, selectively remembered and stripped of all comparative context, in which only Western sins register, only Western agency exists, and the rest of humanity appears solely as a victim.

These issues matter because the West has re-entered a new Cold War and an era of great power competition with illiberal and anti-democratic regimes such as Russia and China. In the first Cold War, Soviet 'active measures' targeted this vulnerability with precision: the belief that a Western population, persuaded of its own irredeemable criminality, would lack the conviction to defend itself. What is remarkable about the present moment is that such investments are hardly required. Britain conducts the exercise unprompted, at its own expense and through its own institutions, many of them publicly funded by British taxpayers. Britain needs to recover its confidence and sense of self and to stop treating

6 This report draws on and develops material first published in Stokes (2023).

an indictment as settled before the accounts have been examined.

This report proceeds in four sections. The first looks at some of the economic arguments and takes up the question Kristian Niemietz (2024) asked of the empire for the IEA in 2024: whether the enterprise actually paid. He answered that it did not, or barely. I ask the narrower question about slavery, and then the one his study left open: what Britain paid, in public money, to end a trade it had once dominated. The second section examines the bill itself, the Brattle Group's £18.8 trillion, which reparations activists use, and I unpack how it was arrived at. The third is historical. The report asks: did the trade have other suppliers and other purchasers, and if so, what follows for any principle of inherited liability? The fourth is strategic. The atonement complex has become an instrument of statecraft for Moscow, Beijing and Tehran, and Britain's response to it is now a question of national security.

Did slavery make Britain rich?

The transatlantic slave trade plays a huge part in what academics call the postcolonial or decolonial critique of Western civilisation.[7] Kehinde Andrews, arguably one of the UK's leading critical race theorists, captures the sentiment well when he argues that the West is founded on genocide, slavery and colonialism and its wealth today is directly traceable to that terrible trade in human souls.[8] This 'anti-racism' explicitly invokes this history in its moral critique of the UK, as anti-racism 'cannot be framed as a diversity project without understanding the colonial structures of racial injustice that created the slave trade' (Banerjee 2022).

The charge is not only that Britain participated in the trade, but also that the trade created a legacy of unequal and unjust economic enrichment for Britain. What is called the new history of capitalism thesis argues that 'industrial capitalism and the Great Divergence' between the West and the global South 'emerged from the violent caldron of slavery, colonialism, and the expropriation of land'. It helps explain present-

7 The historical survey in this and the following sections is adapted from Stokes (2023), updated throughout with current data and expanded to address the Church of England's Project Spire.

8 Andrews, K. (2021) *The New Age of Empire: How Racism and Colonialism Still Rule the World*. London: Allen Lane.

day disparities and alleged racism in the present day,[9] which is said to be largely built on the 'backs and souls of enslaved people [who] built Britain – the backs of those who toiled in cotton fields and plantations in British colonies, and the souls of those who did not survive the journey'.[10]

The Church's own Oversight Group for Project Spire observes that white men 'allocate the vast bulk of investment capital in Europe and the Americas', and seeks to critically question 'the capitalist systems that colonialism benefited from', and recommends that the fund channel money into Black-led businesses and fund managers, with a significant share of 'the Commissioners' UK social impact portfolio' allocated to 'Black-led organisations and/or Black-majority communities' (Oversight Group n.d.). The implication is hard to miss: the white majority is collectively guilty and owes a moral and financial debt to the descendants of the victims of the transatlantic slave trade.

This charge contains two separate claims. First, that Great Britain grew rich on slavery and that its wealth today still rests on that terrible legacy. The second is about the enslaved and their descendants: that the damage done to them is intergenerational and can only be fixed by giving lots of money to nations and people affected by this legacy. Nobody disputes that slavery did terrible harm to the people subjec-

9 Sven Beckert, 'How the West got rich and modern capitalism was born', *PBS News*, 13 February 2015 (https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/west-got-rich-modern-capitalism-born). See his extended discussion in Beckert (2014). For the classic statement of this, see Williams (1994). See also Findlay and O'Rourke (2009) and Blackburn (1998). For an incisive critique, see Burnard and Riello (2020).

10 Imran Khan, 'Britain was built on the backs, and souls, of slaves', *Al Jazeera*, 11 Jun 2020 (https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/6/11/britain-was-built-on-the-backs-and-souls-of-slaves).

ted to it. What is in dispute is whether that harm can be traced into the present, put on a bill and charged to Britain. The two claims do different work. The first says why Britain should pay. The second says how much.

On the first claim, it is clear that some Britons grew rich on slavery (Engerman 1972). Edward Colston, whose statue was thrown into Bristol harbour by Black Lives Matter protesters in 2020, is one example among thousands; the Legacies of British Slavery database at University College London lists the individuals and families who drew wealth from the trade and the plantations, and the list is long. However, the reparations claim goes further. It says that the nation as a whole was made rich, that the wealth is still here and that the white majority are collectively guilty and should be made to pay. That is a different proposition, and the evidence for it is much weaker.[11]

The strongest recent evidence for a positive contribution to British wealth comes from Stephan Heblich, Stephen Redding and Hans-Joachim Voth (2022), who use the 1834 compensation records to trace where slavery wealth sat within Britain and what it did there. They find that it primarily mattered locally, above all in Lancashire, where it financed cotton mills and shifted employment out of agriculture, and they put the aggregate effect at something like a decade's growth in income per head.[12] Ellora Derenoncourt's (2025) study of European port cities similarly finds that slaving voyages predicted faster city growth, distinct from other trade, which is a local effect and says little about the national aggregate.

11 'Legacies of British Slavery' (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs//).

12 Note that this is a working paper.

Three points follow. First, a decade of growth for the country as a whole is a real boost, but it is nothing like the foundation of a nation's wealth: Heblich and his co-authors put the effect on national income at roughly a decade's growth, and no more. Second, Joel Mokyr (1999) had reached the same conclusion a quarter of a century earlier. British slavery was overwhelmingly a sugar business, and the plantations of the West Indies supplied the sweetener for the national drink and little else that industry needed, which is why Mokyr could write that without slavery Britain 'would have had to drink bitter tea, but it still would have had an Industrial Revolution, if perhaps at a marginally slower pace'.[13] Coal, iron and invention owed nothing to the plantations. Cotton did: Lancashire's raw cotton came in the eighteenth century partly from the West Indies and Brazil and, from the 1790s, overwhelmingly from the United States, as discussed below. Third, even Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, whose *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution* is the fullest recent case for slavery's importance, say in terms that they are not claiming it was necessary. Their firmest claim is that slavery was formative in the timing and nature of Britain's industrial transition, which is close to Barbara Solow's (1985) position of forty years ago and a long way from Williams (1994). What nobody in that exchange defends is the proposition on which the reparations case rests: that Britain's wealth derives from slavery (Berg and Hudson 2023).[14]

A second version of the enrichment claim concerns the decades after Britain left the slave trade in 1807 and legislated to

13 Chapter in full here https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.northwestern.edu/dist/3/1222/files/2016/06/Editors-Introduction-The-New-Economic-History-1999-1thoner.pdf

14 See Goldman (2023) for a critical analysis.

end slavery in its colonies in 1833, when British cotton spinning ran on cotton picked by slaves in the American South. Marika Sherwood (2007) and Sven Beckert (2014) have documented that dependence, and the Church Commissioners' defenders now use the point to argue that the British state remained fiscally entangled in slavery long after abolition. It did, in the sense that any economy trading with the antebellum South did, and if the purchase of slave-grown cotton creates a liability, it attaches first to the republic that owned the slaves and then, in equal measure, to every mill in Europe and New England that bought the crop. It is also worth remembering what Lancashire did in 1862, when the Union blockade cut off Southern cotton and left the mills idle. The working men of Manchester wrote to Lincoln to support the blockade and the end of slavery, and Lincoln replied that he had rarely seen 'an instance of sublime Christian heroism'. Opinion in the mill towns was divided, and many had every reason to want the cotton back; the Manchester meeting backed the blockade and emancipation all the same in the depths of the cotton famine.[15]

Eltis and Engerman (2000) have shown how small the slave trade was within British commerce as a whole: in 1792, its peak year, slaving accounted for about 1.5 per cent of British ships and 3 per cent of tonnage, figures Niemietz (2024) has already set out for readers of this series. A broader point emerges: if a trade this small could drive industrialisation, Europe's first industrial power should have been Portugal, not Britain. Eltis and Engerman (2000: 130) continue that though

15 ACWS (American Civil War Society (UK)) (2010) *Lincoln's Letter to the Working-Men of Manchester, England*. Accessed 20 October 2026 (https://acws.co.uk/archives-misc-lincoln_letter).

> Portugal had less than one third the population of Britain in the late eighteenth century, and a total national income which was no doubt still lesser, the country's nationals nevertheless managed to carry nearly two-thirds again as many slaves across the Atlantic than did the British over the course of the slave-trade era.

Indeed, the logic of capitalism itself would suggest that if sugar, the primary commodity produced by slaves on the major Caribbean islands, yielded a massively higher return on investment, capitalists would shift their assets into the sugar industry during this period. However, sugar

> was just one of hundreds of industries in a complex economy; and while sugar was one of the larger industries, its linkages with the rest of the economy and its role as an 'engine' of economic growth compare poorly with textiles, coal, iron ore, and those British agricultural activities which provided significant inputs to industry (Eltis and Engerman 2000: 135).

Robert Paul Thomas went further in 1968 and asked whether the sugar colonies paid for themselves. He answered that they did not: 'The income of Englishmen would have been at least £500,000 higher in the absence of the West Indies from the empire' (Thomas 1968: 30). This matters, as British consumers paid above the world price because colonial sugar was protected, and British taxpayers paid to garrison and defend islands whose product they were then overcharged for. The planters' profit was real and was extracted from the metropolis at least as much as from the world market. Adam Smith had made this general point about empire in 1776, and the loss of the American colonies seven years later tested it: British exports to the independent United States were above their pre-war level within a decade. The gain came from trade, and trade did not require dominion (Smith 1776; Davis

1979). If slavery were truly the engine of national wealth, the puzzle becomes why the societies that practised it longest and most extensively – the Ottoman Empire, the Barbary States, Sokoto and Dahomey – are not among the wealthiest nations on earth today. By that standard, the richest country in the world ought to be Mauritania, the last to formally abolish slavery in 1981, not Britain, which abolished the trade in 1807, slavery in its colonies in 1833, and then spent sixty years suppressing the trade worldwide.

Leading economic historians have concluded that the principal drivers of the 'Little Divergence' in GDP between (primarily northern) Europe and the Mediterranean area were the structural effects of the Black Death in 1348 (raising per capita incomes due to labour shortages) and the opening of new trade routes around 1500. These events, combined with state capacity and the enforcement of property rights to enhance economic growth, began before Britain entered the Atlantic trade in earnest.[16] None of this means the West Indian sector was trivial. For example, sugar was one of Britain's largest single trades; the value of West Indian sugar production in 1805–06 was about 4 per cent of British national income, and Klas Rönnbäck (2018), who has pushed the estimate hardest, puts sugar and its commodity chain at 5 to 6 per cent of GDP in the 1770s. A sector that large is a major industry, but it is not an engine of industrialisation. Britain abolished the trade in 1807 and legislated against slavery itself in 1833; at the moment Seymour Drescher (1977) showed the sector to be at its peak, which is why he called the decision econocide. Importantly, in early-nineteenth-century Britain, almost no one had the right to vote. A survey

16 For a summary, Stephen Broadberry, 'Accounting for the Great Divergence', *CEPR*, 16 November 2013 (https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/accounting-great-divergence); for a fuller exposition see the excellent Broadberry et al. (2015).

conducted in 1780 showed that the electorate in England and Wales consisted of 214,000 people, less than 3 per cent of the total population of approximately 8 million at the time. Whatever slavery yielded, it yielded to a class that could vote, own property and legislate. The bill for ending it fell on a population that could do none of these.

What abolition cost

Britain's exit from slavery was a choice hastened by the slave revolts, above all in Haiti, that helped expose the system's fragility, coupled with a domestic movement drawing on Christian and Enlightenment ideas of a common humanity, which built the consensus that ended it. Importantly, no foreign power imposed abolition on Britain (Drescher 2009; Brown 2006).

After ending its own trade in 1807, Britain set out to suppress everyone else's. The Royal Navy formed the West Africa Squadron in 1808 with that single task. Castlereagh extracted a declaration against the trade at the Congress of Vienna; France agreed to abolish it; Spain and also Portugal agreed and were paid for it. Despite this, France repeatedly refused to let British warships stop its merchantmen, and slavers moved from flag to flag. Later the Navy turned to the Indian Ocean, where the older Arab trade to the Middle East had grown to fill the gap that Atlantic suppression left. Ending the slave trade was neither cheap nor easy, but the British state nevertheless chose to devote large sums to this task (Lloyd 1968; Stokes 2023: ch. 4).[17]

What did this all cost? The figure most often quoted comes from Chaim Kaufmann and Robert Pape (1999: 631; 636), who put the campaign at about 1.8 per cent of national income a year for sixty years and called it the most expensive international moral action in modern history.

17 On the eastern trade, see Lovejoy (2012: ch.7).

The figure is repeated often and, as its critics point out, often misread, because it bundles three different things. The first is money the state spent or gave up: the squadrons, the courts that tried captured slavers, the diplomacy, the customs revenue lost with the trade and the £20 million paid to slave owners in 1833. Averaged over sixty years, that is 0.22 per cent of national income a year. The second, and the bulk of the total at about 1.5 per cent, is business Britain gave up: the trade itself; exports to Africa and the West Indies; and the sugar-carrying trade. The third is what consumers paid for free-grown sugar under the protective duties, about 0.24 per cent (Kaufmann and Pape 1999: Table 1, p. 637).

Each fell on different people, and that is the key point. The forgone business fell on the merchants, shippers and planters who had profited from the trade, and on the people they employed, so those losses fell where the gains had. The state's outlays fell on taxpayers and the sugar premium on consumers. The wider economy had drawn some benefit from the slave sector – roughly a decade's growth based on the best recent estimate – spread thinly across the population. The profits went to a few thousand families, and the bill for ending the trade fell on everyone. The reparations case treats the gains from slavery as national. Its own best source shows them concentrated, and the cost of ending them is spread across the public.

The public cost was large by any measure. The economic historian David Eltis (1987) put direct spending on suppression at a minimum of £250,000 a year for half a century. On his reckoning, Britain spent about as much stamping out the slave trade in the nineteenth century as it had earned from it in the eighteenth. Alan Lester (2024), the campaign's most prominent critic, replies that the earlier profits were a bigger share of a much smaller economy, and he is right. But the

objection does not touch the point that matters here. The profits and the costs were of the same order. A few thousand merchants and planters took the profits. The costs came out of the Exchequer (Eltis 1987: 97).

To the naval bill we should also add £300,000 paid to Portugal in 1815 and £400,000 to Spain in 1817 for their agreement to leave the trade (Hansard n.d.), and the £20 million of 1833: about 40 per cent of a year's government revenue, roughly 5 per cent of GDP, borrowed on the national debt and folded into stock not finally redeemed until 2015. Servicing it was expected to require a 4 per cent rise in all taxes for a decade (Kaufmann and Pape 1999: 639). On the private side, the largest single payment went to John Gladstone, father of the prime minister, who received £106,769 for the slaves on his nine plantations.[18] This fact is often used to further impugn Britain's history, the argument being that those who most profited from human misery in the slave trade benefited the most. However, repugnant as this may be, it was designed to buy off the concentrated interests that could have blocked emancipation. It was a buy-out to further the goal of ending the slave trade, and the buyers were taxpayers. This is before we account for the dead, with about five thousand British lives over sixty years, most to disease on the West Africa station (Kaufmann and Pape 1999: 631; 635).

Motive is the other objection: anti-slavery, it is said, served empire, and its motives were mixed. They were; few policies are not. John Meadowcroft (2026) has recently made the pub-

18 Sanchez Manning, 'Britain's colonial shame: Slave-owners given huge payouts after abolition', *The Independent*, 26 February 2013 (https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/britain-s-colonial-shame-slaveowners-given-huge-payouts-after-abolition-8508358.html); 'Legacies of British Slavery' (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs//).

lic-choice case that abolition gave its leaders status and salvation and left the compensated planters and the bankers who handled the money no worse off (which is part of why it passed). Yet Kaufmann and Pape, the source the critics rely on, found that the campaign brought Britain no noticeable material benefit in wealth or power and that the West African stations yielded little or no commercial return (Kaufmann and Pape 1999: 638).[19] If anti-slavery was also imperial policy, then the settlements it produced belong on the empire account, and Patrick O'Brien, Lance Davis and Robert Huttenback have shown what that account looked like: a net charge on the taxpayer, with the returns going to a narrow class of investors and officials (O'Brien 1988; Davis and Huttenback 1986).[20]

The settlements are the last entry, and in 1787, Sierra Leone began as a philanthropic venture for freed slaves, then failed as a company and was taken over by the Crown in 1808, after which it ran on parliamentary grants and served as the base for the squadron and the mixed commission court (Everill 2013). Lagos was annexed in 1861 to close the last great slaving port on the Bight of Benin (Mann 2007; Kaufmann and Pape 1999: 638). By 1865 the House of Commons had had enough: a select committee on the West African settlements resolved that policy should aim at withdrawal from all of them, Sierra Leone possibly excepted, on grounds of cost.[21] Parliament, in other words, reached Adam Smith's conclusion about the abolitionist colonies within a generation of

19 For the imperial reading, Huzzey (2012) and Lester (2024).

20 Both discussed in Niemietz (2024: chs 3 and 4).

21 Report from the Select Committee on Africa (Western Coast), Parliamentary Papers 1865 (412), v: 'ultimate withdrawal from all, except, probably, Sierra Leone'.

acquiring them. Later in the century the same logic produced the Uganda Railway, proposed by the Foreign Office to the Treasury in 1890 as a means of cutting the slave routes from the interior to the coast, and built at a cost to the taxpayer of £5.2 million (Hill 1949; Whitehouse 1948). What the Royal Navy could not finish at sea, the Exchequer paid to finish on land.

The bill examined

The Brattle Group's report of 2023 puts Britain's liability for the period of enslavement at $24 trillion, £18.8 trillion at the time, of which $9.6 trillion is owed to Jamaica, with a further $2.2 trillion added for the century after emancipation (The Brattle Group 2023). This figure is a damages calculation. Brattle takes heads of damage familiar from personal-injury litigation, loss of life and uncompensated labour, loss of liberty, personal injury, mental pain and anguish, and gender-based violence, and then attaches a value to each for every person enslaved and brings the sums forward to the present at compound interest. The report's own alternative calculation shows where the money is: at a 2.3 per cent rate rather than the 2.5 per cent headline assumption, the British total falls to about $17 trillion. A fifth of a percentage point in the assumed rate moves the bill by $7 trillion. Across three centuries, the interest does most of the work.

Brattle anticipates the obvious objection that the bill exceeds Britain's annual output several times over and answers that a year's GDP is the wrong yardstick for a harm accumulated over centuries. It instead offers two alternatives: the bill as a share of Britain's cumulative GDP over the decades since the harm, which it presents as a modest fraction, and the bill as a share of national wealth (Office for National Statistics 2026). The second is the honest comparison, because a liability is paid out of what a country has and can produce, and the report's choice is telling. The Office for National Statistics puts the net worth of the United Kingdom, every house, factory, road and financial asset less every liability, at £13.3 trillion. The claim exceeds it. Cumulative past GDP is income that was earned, taxed and spent by people now dead; it is

not a fund from which anything can be paid. A sum larger than everything Britain owns cannot be a measure of what slavery transferred to Britain, and the report does not say it is. Patrick Robinson, the ICJ judge who introduced it, is careful to say that the payment schedules are recommendatory and that a claimant state may accept any other sum (The Brattle Group 2023). That is the number's political function: an opening bargaining position, sized so that any settlement looks like restraint.

Figure 1: The Brattle Group claim and the net worth of the United Kingdom



Source: The Brattle Group (2023); Office for National Statistics (2026).

Two further features of the report bear on the previous section. First, it treats the £20 million paid to slave owners in 1833 as a sum wrongly paid that Britain must now pay over to the victim states. The highest single cost Britain bore for ending slavery becomes, in Brattle's hands, a debt Britain still owes. Second, Robinson's introduction rests the timing of abolition on Eric Williams, for the proposition that Britain ended the trade for economic rather than moral reasons (The Brattle Group 2023: pp.71-73). The reparations case, in its most authoritative statement, still depends on a thesis that Kaufmann and Pape (1999) describe as discredited and that the previous section has shown to be the reverse of the truth.

This is why it is not enough to show that Britain did not profit. Brattle's case rests on harm, and the harm was real; Niemietz (2024) concedes as much, and the econometric literature on Africa, from Nathan Nunn (2008) onwards, supports him. The report's own theory of the case makes the next

point for me. Robinson's introduction lists seven phases of the wrong, and the first is 'capture and sale of Africans in Africa'; the symposium that preceded the report concluded that the trade was unlawful under the law of the African countries where the transaction took place, 'the law and practice of which were opposed' to it (The Brattle Group 2023: 2).

The historical section that follows tests that last claim against Dahomey, Sokoto and Zanzibar, and in the conclusion against Asante, none of whose law or practice was opposed to anything of the kind. And having placed the capture in Africa inside the wrong, the report then declares that it 'does not take on the important issues of harm to African countries' (The Brattle Group 2023: 5) and apportions nothing to the states that did the capturing. Nunn's (2008) work, which the report's defenders cite for the harm, covers all four of Africa's slave trades, and his mechanism is internal: the trades did their lasting damage by turning African communities against each other in the business of capture (Nunn and Wantchekon 2011). If the harm is the basis of the claim, the claim has more than one defendant, and the report's own first phase names them. That is the purpose of the historical section that follows: to identify the other parties to the transaction.

Slavery in history

Recognising the history of slavery matters, which is why most British schools teach it. We should remain cognisant of the horror and human suffering of the transatlantic slave trade. However, not only has slavery been ubiquitous throughout human history, but so have non-European empires, colonialism and great power competition. Indeed, the dominant norm throughout most human history has been territorial acquisition through domination, conflict and war. The idea that a weaker foe's claims to land should be respected out of charity or an amorphous set of rights has simply not been the norm for most of humanity's history, and it is more than possible that world politics may return to its historical norm.

Sadly, like war and conflict, slavery has been the norm throughout human history. Even today, the most recent Global Estimates produced by the International Labour Organization (ILO), Walk Free and the International Organisation for Migration concluded that 50 million people were living in modern slavery on any given day in 2021, comprising 28 million in forced labour and 22 million in forced marriage, a rise of some 10 million on the previous estimates from 2016 (International Labour Organization 2022). Separately, the ILO and UNICEF's most recent joint assessment, published in June 2025, found 138 million children worldwide in child labour, including 54 million in hazardous work (ILO and UNICEF 2025; Walk Free 2025).

The Anti-Slavery International's report outlined the continued modern-day prevalence of descent-based slavery, whereby people are born into slavery because their ancestors

were captured into slavery. They conclude that this 'form of slavery can still be found across the Sahel belt of Africa, including Mauritania, Niger, Mali, Chad and Sudan'. And many 'other African societies also have a traditional hierarchy where people are known to be the descendants of slaves or slave-owners'.[22] What demands explanation is slavery's ending, above all, where a state abandoned it without being forced to by arms. Its persistence, as these figures show, needs none.

22 Anti-Slavery International (n.d.) 'What is descent-based slavery' (blog) (https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/descent-based-slavery/).

Slavery in Africa

Tippu Tip, the Afro-Omani ivory and slave trader, ran one of East Africa's largest slaving operations, controlling seven plantations in Zanzibar worked by an estimated 10,000 slaves by 1895. 'Each individual was in his own right a coloniser and a planter of the first order,' with African slaves 'the means of realising that status'. Laura Fair argued that 'Slaves, and the profit derived from both their sale and their labor, were at the very heart of Zanzibar's transformation from a small and relatively unimportant Swahili town to the centre of a vast trading empire stretching from central Africa to halfway around the world' (Fair 2001: 12). In 1873, under sustained British pressure delivered through Sir Bartle Frere's mission, Sultan Barghash of Zanzibar signed a treaty closing the island's slave market and prohibiting the seaborne trade in slaves throughout his dominions, with the Royal Navy enforcing the ban. Zanzibar became a British protectorate in 1890, and slavery itself was finally abolished by decree in 1897. This treaty, along with abolitionist efforts, contributed to slavery's eventual abolition in Zanzibar. However, Tip's legacy remained with clear distinctions 'between slaves and the free, urbanites and rural dwellers, mainlanders and islanders and Arab and African. Divisions that are still apparent in the pre- and post-revolution politics of Tanzania' (Boswell 2008: 26). The bill for closing the Zanzibar trade fell where the Atlantic bill had fallen: the Brussels Act of 1890 committed Britain to the interior, and the railway that followed cost the Treasury £5.2 million.

Thornton (n.d.) argues that intra-African slavery predated European contact and that 'European merchants had little or no involvement in the first part of the slaves' journey', which

was 'generally the work of African rulers, merchants, and sometimes lawless figures like bandits.' The Dutch West India Company's own records, exceeding 100,000 pages, contain 'scarcely any mention of direct enslavement of Africans', since European merchants purchased their captives from African sellers, 'usually with the active participation of African states' (see also Thornton 2012). The delivery of enslaved Africans to Europeans was, in short, an African business, managed by African commercial and political elites, many of whose descendants continue to rule African states today.

The most notable of the African slave states was the Kingdom of Dahomey in West Africa (Fuglestad 2018). It existed from 1600 until 1904. The Kingdom of Dahomey was an African kingdom located in what is now modern-day Benin. The kingdom was known for its military might and its reliance on slavery as a key part of its economy. A series of kings ruled Dahomey, most notably King Ghezo, who ruled from 1818 to 1858. During his reign, King Ghezo expanded the Kingdom of Dahomey and increased its wealth by capturing and selling slaves. The kingdom's slave trade was primarily focused on the Yoruba Empire of Oyo, which Dahomey extensively raided and which became a major source of slaves for the kingdom. Many of these slaves were put to work on the royal plantations, while others were sold to European slave traders. Dahomey's fortunes in conquest and slavery were only ended with the cessation of slave exports to Brazil and other efforts by the British to suppress the kingdom's slaving. This met stiff resistance, and a British blockade in 1851–52 forced Ghezo to sign a treaty renouncing the trade, which continued covertly for another decade and dwindled only when its outlets on the coast were closed (Law 1997). The same campaign against the Bight of Benin trade bombarded Lagos in Decem-

ber 1851 and annexed it in 1861, a colony acquired, on the Foreign Office's own account, to close a slave port.

The Islamic slave trade

The Barbary slave trade, run from the corsair states of the North African coast, was Islam's counterpart to the Atlantic trade in reverse: the mass enslavement of white Europeans. Estimates vary, but at their height the corsair states of Tunis, Algiers and Tripoli alone enslaved over a million Europeans between the sixteenth century and the mid-eighteenth century, and in the 1620s more British subjects lived as slaves in Islamic North Africa than as free colonists in North America (Leiner 2007: 15). The men went to the galleys, and the women into the seraglio system (seraglio was a synonym for 'harem' in Ottoman culture) (Capp 2022). The raids reached Iceland in 1627 and Cornwall in 1645, and the trade was only finally suppressed with the French conquest of Algeria in 1830 (Office of the Historian n.d.).

The Sokoto caliphate, founded by Usman dan Fodio in what is now northern Nigeria, was one of the largest slave societies in modern history, extending across parts of present-day Niger, Chad and Cameroon throughout the nineteenth century, with a slave population 'certainly in excess of 1 million and perhaps more than 2.5 million people' (Lovejoy and Hogendorn 1993: xiii). The slave trade was an important source of wealth for the caliphate, and slaves were traded both within West Africa and with other parts of the world. Most of its captives were usually children, taken

> in jihad from mainly non-Muslim communities to serve as slaves. These slaves worked on farms or within households, they might be concubines and bear children for their owners; or they might be sold as children for export to North Africa in

payment for the luxury imports the new elite wanted (Last 2021).

As Bashir Salau (2018: 29) argues, 'The nature of Sokoto caliphate plantations tells us that slaves were typically acquired through acts of violence and as such were usually "outsiders" stripped of their social identity.' This status 'allowed masters to buy and sell them, thereby placing them into the category of property'. As Abdulazizi Lodhi notes, 'When it came to exports, tribal Africans were the main actors. In many African societies there were no prisons, so people who were captured were sold'.[23] Sokoto's slave economy began to unravel with Lugard's conquest of 1903 and the slow abolition that Lovejoy and Hogendorn (1993) have traced across the following three decades in a Northern Nigeria that ran for years on imperial grants-in-aid.

It is often asserted, particularly among Western academics sympathetic to postcolonial framings, that Islamic slavery was more benign than its Atlantic counterpart: less racialised, more readily assimilated and softened by religious injunction. Ronald Segal's (2001) *Islam's Black Slaves* makes the case at length, and his own evidence supplies the rebuttal. The practice most distinctive to the Islamic trade was the mass castration of enslaved boys to supply eunuchs for harems, courts and administration; this operation had a mortality rate that contemporary observers estimated to be at well over half at the centres studied by Hogendorn (1999), and it was performed on children of eight to twelve because older bodies rarely survived it. The size of the twelve to seventeen million Africans carried into the Islamic world across thirteen centuries was comparable in scale to the whole

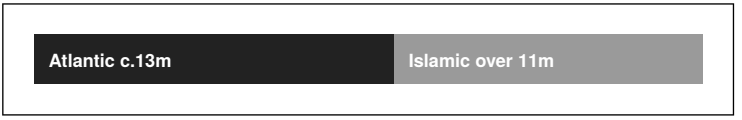
23 In Silja Fröhlich, 'East Africa's Forgotten Slave Trade', *Deutsche Welle*, 22 August 2019 (https://www.dw.com/en/east-africas-forgotten-slave-trade/a-50126759).

Atlantic trade. Segal himself (2001) asks why so large a trade left so slight a trace in the populations that received it, and the historians provide several reasons: the trade that was two-thirds female, the castration of many of the males, high mortality during transport and labour, and the absorption of the children of concubines into free households.

On external trade, Lovejoy (2012: 117) concludes that 24 million slaves were exported from sub-Saharan Africa in the 11 centuries from 800 to 1900. The Atlantic slave trade accounted for nearly 13 million, or a little over half of this total. The Islamic slave trade to Muslim states in the Middle East, North Africa, Europe and Asia accounted for the rest, at over 11 million.[24] However, on a longer time scale and factoring in the trade across the Sahara, some estimates argue the Arab slave trade trafficked up to 17 million (9 million across the Sahara, 8 million by sea) (Pétré-Grenouilleau 2004: 197–81; Mann 2007). The UN General Assembly's March 2026 resolution names the transatlantic trade as 'the gravest crime against humanity', a ranking the United States objected to that day. Read against Lovejoy's (2012) figures, it is a claim about half of Africa's external slave exports, made in silence about the other half and about the states that supplied both. Perhaps more tellingly, the affirmative votes included Nigeria, whose Sultan of Sokoto descends from the founder of one of Africa's largest slaveholding states; Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which retained legal slavery under their ruling dynasties until 1962 and 1952 respectively; and Mauritania, which criminalised slavery only in 2007. Their support invites an obvious question: will the same demand for historical accountability extend to their own aristocracies and ruling houses?

24 For a general history see Fage and Oliver (1975-1986).

Figure 2: Slaves exported from sub-Saharan Africa, 800–1900



Source: Lovejoy (2012: 117).

Atonement in an era of great power competition

National interests arise from a deeper sense of national identity. A country that cannot say who it is cannot coherently say what it wants. The politics of Western guilt is no longer a conversation Britain is having with itself; it has become an instrument of state competition, enthusiastically adopted by regimes with slaving records of their own and no intention of reckoning with them.

For example, when announcing the annexation of four Ukrainian regions on 30 September 2022, Vladimir Putin devoted a long passage of his speech to the West's historical crimes: 'It is worth reminding the West that it began its colonial policy back in the Middle Ages and then followed the global slave trade, the genocide of Indian tribes in America, the plunder of India, of Africa, the wars of England and France against China' (Putin 2022: 4). Derivatives of the word 'colonialism' appear thirteen times in a thirty-seven-minute speech justifying the armed seizure of a neighbour's territory. The theme has since been institutionalised. In February 2024, Moscow hosted a standing forum called 'For the Freedom of Nations!', chaired by Dmitry Medvedev, at which Putin's official greeting described neocolonialism as 'a shameful legacy of centuries-long plunder and exploitation of the people of Africa, Asia, Latin America'. At the same gathering, Leonid Slutsky, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, proposed that the losses inflicted on Africa and Latin America by Western colonialism be formally calculated and reparations demanded of the West. The Kremlin has moved from echoing the reparations agenda to sponsor-

ing it. Sergei Lavrov (2022), touring African capitals in July 2022, published an article in African newspapers asserting that Russia 'has not stained itself with the bloody crimes of colonialism', a claim made on behalf of a state then prosecuting Europe's largest war of territorial conquest since 1945, and heir to an empire that expanded across eleven time zones.

Beijing's usage is more disciplined and more instructive. The Atlantic trade sits in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' standing repertoire. Asked in September 2022 about the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, Zhao Lijian answered that 'slave trade was an original sin of the US'; pressed on the Xinjiang genocide findings that summer, Wang Wenbin (2022) replied that the United States should 'issue a report on genocide against Native Americans' and 'apologize to and compensate' their descendants. The purpose of such answers is to change the subject. Still, deflection succeeds only when the audience has already accepted the premise that Western history disqualifies it from any moral foundation to make a judgement.

Similarly, as American cities burned in the summer of 2020, Iran's former Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, tweeted that 'if you're dark-skinned walking in the US, you can't be sure you'll be alive in the next few minutes' (Newsweek, 2020).[25] Days later, in a televised address, he called the killing of George Floyd 'the true face of America', and said it was what the United States had always done around the world, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and, before that, Vietnam (*Times of Israel*,

25 Benjamin Fearnow, 'Iran leaders criticize U.S. "racism" after George Floyd death', *Newsweek*, 31 May 2020 (https://www.newsweek.com/iran-leaders-criticize-us-racism-after-george-floyd-death-black-americans-not-sure-theyll-1507679).

2020).[26] This is from the head of a theocracy that executes protesters, in a country where slavery, sustained by the Gulf traffic in Africans examined earlier in this report, was formally abolished only in 1929.

The consequences for security policy are concrete. The first is fiscal. Britain has endorsed the Hague Commitment to raise defence spending towards 5 per cent of GDP, an undertaking that will strain the public finances for a generation. Set against it, a notional liability of £18.8 trillion, any politically negotiated fraction of it, or its quiet payment through a development budget rebranded as restitution, is a claim on the same resources. A state cannot fund rearmament and open-ended expiation from the same purse; any fiscal decision the British state makes carries clear opportunity costs. The Treasury would find that liability easier to resist if it knew and acknowledged what its predecessors had already paid.

The second is legal in what we might call a 'boil the frog slowly' strategy. The Jamaican questions are now before the Judicial Committee, and the movement chose an advisory route because they are cheap to obtain but politically expensive to ignore. For example, the ICJ's 2019 advisory opinion on the Chagos Archipelago, legally non-binding, produced within six years a signed treaty ceding sovereign territory and committing Britain to payments averaging £101 million a year to lease back the Diego Garcia base Britain operates with the United States. The treaty remains unratified and under review, but no government has yet found a way to repudiate it. Reparations campaigners cite Chagos, accurately, as proof

26 AFP, 'Floyd killing shows "true face" of US, charges Iran's Khamenei', *Times of Israel*, 3 June 2020 (https://www.timesofisrael.com/floyd-killing-shows-true-face-of-us-charges-irans-khamenei/).

of method: an advisory finding, a hardening obligation and a negotiated transfer. The Judicial Committee's opinion would bind nobody, but neither did the ICJ's on Chagos.

The third is alliance management. The United States' November 2025 National Security Strategy is explicit that Washington wants Europe 'to regain its civilisational self-confidence', treats the continent's loss of national identity and self-belief as a strategic problem and pledges opposition to elite-driven restrictions on core liberties among allies. One need not endorse every line of that document to see the difficulty. At the moment its indispensable ally has made civilisational confidence a test of European reliability, Britain is being invited to open negotiations premised on its own civilisational guilt.

None of this places Britain's record beyond discussion, and hostile amplification does not by itself falsify a claim; Moscow's cynicism tells us nothing about the eighteenth century. It tells us a great deal about the present and about the uses to which a nation's self-account is put by those who wish it ill.

Conclusion

As this report has shown, the account on which the politics of reparations rests fails on its economics before it fails on its history. Slavery was a large industry and a small part of the British economy. It enriched a tiny minority that could vote and legislate at the expense of the huge majority of Britons who could not, and the nation then spent sixty years of public money ending a trade whose profits had been private. The bill now presented is a compound-interest calculation larger than the country it is presented to, and the question of whether Britain must pay at all is now on its way to a court.

The historical myopia of the atonement complex is so acute that Istanbul hosted the World Decolonization Forum in May of this year, gathering scholars from some forty countries to examine Western 'epistemic dominance' and the colonial structures said to underwrite it.[27] For almost 500 years, Istanbul was the capital of the Ottoman Empire. This power ruled from the Danube to the Persian Gulf, which sustained one of the largest and longest-running slave systems in recorded history, which raided the Balkans and the Caucasus for captives and levied Christian children from its own subject populations under the devşirme, and which continued to traffic Africans across the Red Sea and the Sahara well after the Royal Navy had begun hanging slavers as pirates. Ottoman slavery was not fully abolished until the twentieth century. That a conference on the evils of empire and the injustice of

27 World Decolonization Forum (2026) *World Decolonization Forum: An Istanbul Perspective on Decolonization* (https://www.decolonizationforum.org/perspective/forum-insight/world-decolonization-forum-an-istanbul-perspective-on-decolonization).

inherited privilege should convene in the former imperial capital, without the faintest suggestion that its host civilisation might have anything to answer for, is not an oversight, but the entire logic of the enterprise displayed in miniature.

What was distinctive about the West, and about Britain above all, was abolition. No external power forced it, and, as this report has argued, a domestic movement, grounded in Christian and Enlightenment universalism, persuaded a nation to outlaw a profitable institution. The state then spent blood and treasure for half a century suppressing the trade globally, at the cost of some five thousand British lives and a charge on the Exchequer it never recovered.

Institutions and individuals are entirely free to explore questions of historical importance, including uncomfortable ones, and no one should dispute the Church's right to investigate its own past, or a university's right to reconsider its history, or any citizen's right to conclude that Britain owes the world an apology. The objection is not to the inquiry but to how it has been conducted: one-sided, resting on broader historical and economic narratives that are highly contested and rarely acknowledged as such, and presented as settled fact to audiences already primed by a quasi-official institutional ideology of repudiation and endless apology.

What is to be done? First, the Treasury should publish what suppressing the slave trade and emancipation cost the public purse, so the next minister invited to negotiate knows what their predecessors already paid and can say so. Second, tell the whole story. Britain's schools and museums teach the trade, but they should also teach its ending with the same seriousness, and teach the trades Britain neither ran nor ended, because a history in which only Western agency exists is Eurocentric and deeply patronising to non-Western nations

and cultures, which are reduced to a form of childlike innocence. Third, the Government should go to Antigua with an offer: there are fifty million people in slavery today, four times the number the Atlantic trade carried in as many centuries, and a third of them are held in four Commonwealth countries: India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Bangladesh, all of which voted in March to call the Atlantic trade the gravest crime in history. Britain has a two-hundred-year record and the moral right to call for these nations to end their domestic slave trades today and perhaps pay reparations to those freed and their families (Walk Free 2023). A Commonwealth organised around the slavery that exists in the here and now would be worth more to its members than one organised around the slavery that Britain ended. Ultimately, a confident nation declines to accept liability for a trade it spent sixty years and thousands of lives suppressing, and the Government should say as much when the atonement complex comes knocking.

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The Institute of Economic Affairs
2 Lord North Street
London SW1P 3LB
Tel 020 7799 8900
email iea@iea.org.uk

