

>> It is true that Switzerland as a nation (as far as it existed in those days) did not have any merchant fleet. But Swiss entrepreneurs, merchants, bankers etc. participated in slave trading expeditions. Therefore, I do not see any contradiction.

On page 21 of your book you say that you do not want to differentiate between direct and indirect participation. Why?



Hans Faessler behind the statue of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the legendary liberator who led a slave rebellion in St Domingue, defeating both the French and British armies and helping to establish the Republic of Haiti

I would like to define the slave trading and the Slave Trade as part of an economic system which could only function on the exploitation of millions of people. For this reason, I do not make any difference between the whip-swinging plantation manager and the cotton merchant. In the long run, both profited from the same unjust system.

Is it possible today to make a financial evaluation of the slave labour that was provided to Switzerland?

Three French-speaking Swiss authors, taking account of Swiss investments in the most important colonial companies, have counted more than 172,000 slaves who were deported with Swiss participation, which sums up to about 1.5 per cent of the entire Trans-Atlantic trade. In my book, I

tried to compile a total of all slave plantations and properties owned by Swiss citizens. Assuming an average lifespan of 10 years for a plantation slave, and assuming that about 100 slaves worked on a plantation which could be worked for 30 years, one can reckon with about half a million man-years for a roughly estimated figure of 50 Swiss plantations in Latin America, the Caribbean, North America and South Africa. To be added would be the figure for those slaves who worked in Swiss households and factories. I assume that this figure, compared with the total volume of the man-years spent in the slave economy of the New World, would amount to a percentage in the lower single-digit range, which could be considered as also being appropriate for Swiss participation in military operations.

Since Switzerland, a landlocked country, took part in slave trading, do you think that there were more countries involved in the trade other than the classical ones like France, Portugal, Spain and Britain?

The Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Brandenburg (now part of Germany) are also well-known. According to the Nigerian historian, Inikori, the economic system which was based on slavery defined itself as follows: "The terms 'Atlantic World' and 'Atlantic Basin' are used interchangeably in this study and define a geographical area including Western Europe (Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Great Britain, Ireland), West Africa (from Mauritania in the northwest to Namibia in the southeast, including the two modern regions of West and Central/West Africa) and the American continent (including all of today's countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, USA and Canada)."

With your book, you have rewritten the history of Switzerland. What do you recommend for all the other countries which have hitherto denied or ignored their role in the Slave Trade?

There is no short-cut to the revision of a country's history. This can also be regarded as a process of emancipation. Whoever suppresses the uncomfortable chapters of his history will find himself confronted with them over and over again in the course of time. Reappraisal must take place, and in close co-operation with the descendants of the victims, who might still happen to be victims till today. The indispensable steps to take should be: recapitulation, admission of past wrongs, gesture of apology to the descendants of the victims and compensation. ■

Barbarism of Slave Trade stands out in human history

Extracts of a Declaration by the EU on the Commemoration of the 200th Anniversary of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade released on 26 March 2007

Massive human suffering was brought to the African continent by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Over a period of more than 300 years, millions of men, women and children were shipped to the Americas. Millions more died in the slave hunts in Africa and during what has been called the "Middle Passage" to destinations in the New World of the Americas. The European Union acknowledges and profoundly regrets their tragic plight.

The barbarism of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade stands out in the history of humanity in terms of its magnitude, organized nature and especially its negation of the human dignity of the victims. While Europe was pioneering the Age of Reason and Enlightenment, European merchants took off to enslave the African continent. It therefore was most appropriate and timely that the international community acknowledged at the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban in 2001 that slavery and the slave trade are a crime against humanity and should always have been so.

Besides reminding us of a dark chapter in our history, the 200th anniversary of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, during which an estimated 15 million people were forcibly removed from Africa, also highlights the fact that slavery and the slave trade had been practiced all over the world and for thousands of years, albeit not on such a large scale as during those dark centuries of the transatlantic slave trade.

But this anniversary should also serve as a timely reminder that slavery is still a common practice in many parts of the world and that modern forms like bonded labour and human trafficking are spreading more and more. The various forms of modern slavery add up to a booming international trade, making billions of dollars at the expense of millions of victims. Therefore there can be no room for complacency. As long ago as 1904, the international community identified trafficking in persons and modern day slavery as a crime which can only be combated by international cooperation. It is the EU's firm hope that we can prevent recurrence of the massive human suffering that is being commemorated today. ■