

Translated excerpt

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Afrika
Geschichte eines bunten Kontinents

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Africa
History of a Colorful Continent

Translated by Allison Brown



Africa's Oppression:

How Europeans Divided a Continent among Themselves (ca. 1500–1945)

Africa about 500 years ago was certainly no paradise. In vast areas it was a continent devoid of people, with inhospitable deserts and tropical regions full of pathogenic insects that make it difficult for humans and their house pets and livestock to settle. Around 1500 there were presumably less than 50 million people living on the continent (as compared to more than a billion today).

Slavery existed from time immemorial. The first reports go back to Egyptian armies that returned from military campaigns with prisoners that were used as slaves to build the pyramids. Also among the Bantu peoples, members of the different ethnic groups enslaved each other following armed conflicts. Arab traders from the north were the first to establish a large-scale business trading enslaved children, women, and mostly young men from Central Africa.

However, slavery in most early African civilizations cannot be compared with the later slave trading by Arabs and Europeans. Early slaves were members of the respective family and there were various possibilities of being freed. In many communities considerable cultural developments had taken place that were not based on the exploitation of others.

Even before the Europeans it was the Chinese who starting in 1415 had first landed their huge trade ships, which had been commissioned by the Chinese emperor, along the East African coast. They traded goods and then sailed back, without any ambitions of advancing further into the continent's interior.

In the centuries prior to this, Europe was full of disputes between the various kingdoms and principalities that sent their subjects to fight in senseless wars or had them work as "serfs" for their own luxury. On top of that came the plague epidemic in the fourteenth century, also called the "black death." It spread especially from rats to humans under the poor hygienic conditions and later also among humans as a pneumonic plague. Within only a few years about one-third of the entire European population died, a good 25 million people. Around 1500 Europe was even less paradisiacal than Africa. There were many

people who wanted to leave; and there were rulers and traders who were seeking new sources for their luxury goods.

The Portuguese were the first to reach the coast of western Africa with their sailing ships in the mid-fifteenth century. They were soon followed by other European traders, missionaries, and later also soldiers and entire armies.

Over the course of time, Europeans assumed the role of exploiter and oppressor in other parts of the world—the Americas and large parts of Asia. But nowhere besides Africa were so many millions of people imprisoned, families torn apart, functioning communities destroyed, and men, women, and children transported thousands of miles to places where they were forced to live as slaves, with no hope of ever returning home.

Only gradually is it becoming clear that the catastrophic consequences of systematic abduction of people in Africa go far beyond just casting off the European colonizers and gaining formal independence as modern African countries. The trauma of slavery and the different forms of disenfranchisement and degradation of African people has yet to be fully understood by later generations, not only in Africa but also in Europe and the United States. There is still a long way to go.

This requires a sincere acknowledgment of this injustice in Europe and the United States, as well as an understanding of the ideologies that have been used—then and now—to justify inequality and discrimination of people of color. Many Western aid programs for “poor people in Africa” still today exhibit aspects of paternalism and far too often continue to neglect to address the true causes behind the injustice.

In Africa, people are forced to face the bitter truth that the enormous extent of the slave trade would not have been possible without the complicity of Arab as well as African traders, often also political leaders who got rich at the expense of their people. It remains an important task to question authoritarian structures in Africa that contributed significantly to the scale of the catastrophic situation.

Neither is a simple task.

In historical terms, it was just a short period of time in which Europeans were exploiters and oppressors in Africa, dividing up almost the entire continent—with few exceptions—into colonies, showing no regard whatsoever for the residents, just as criminals treat stolen property.

Far too little is known up to now about the many forms of resistance of African leaders against the European colonial lords: From adapting and seeking peaceful conflict resolution to courageous and often desperate struggles. In many European history books there

are still extensive reports on the battles fought by the Europeans to protect their “endangered women and children in the colonies.” The forms of defense of the Africans forced from their land are usually described as “massacres” and the murdered women and children are given hardly any mention.

In order to prevent rivalries from escalating among the Europeans, German chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) called together representatives of the European powers in 1884 in Berlin. At the same time this served as preparation for the African continent to be divided up at the negotiating table. Representatives of the African peoples were excluded from the meeting. Even if the Europeans felt so powerful, spreading terror and poverty in Africa over the coming decades, the period of colonialism did not last long. The consequences, however, have penetrated deep into reality and are visible to today.

The agreements that were made in Berlin and the national borders that were set in the years that followed, which did not take ethnic kinships into consideration at all, essentially still exist today. In the mid-twentieth century, at the latest, even the most confident colonizing powers had to start acknowledging that their power would not last. The opposition of various African resistance groups had become too strong, and it had become too expensive to maintain the respective colonial administrations. The manner in which the Europeans finally withdrew was in many cases at least as disturbing as their arrival on the African continent had been, as they were now largely playing without showing their cards.

All too often everything possible was undertaken to help install the most corrupt African politicians in power. They were often simply puppets who, despite the banner of “independence,” continued for egotistical motives to serve the interests of the European or, later, American or Soviet powers. Cynically, it was often noted how little the Africans were in a position to “take care of their affairs on their own.” Those who saw through this neo-colonialist game and opposed such external economic and political influence once they were officially freed from colonialism, were repeatedly put under systematic pressure or, when even this was not successful, murdered in cold blood.

The oppression of Africa by European powers began more than 500 years ago, with the arrival of the Portuguese in western Africa.

Hunting People: The Catastrophe of the Slave Trade¹

The first people who were transported from African to Europe were displayed as “exotic creatures” and treated with great curiosity. In fact, at one stage it was fashionable among the wealthy and elegant people of Portugal and Spain, and later also England, France, and Germany, to have a “Negro”² servant. These people were usually not treated as slaves and generally enjoyed the same rights as the rest of the master’s staff. At that time there was still no clear ideology of racism, defining “black people” as “inferior.” They were merely “completely different,” “rather interesting,” and “strange.” For young Congolese it was quite possible to travel to Portugal to further their education and—in exceptional cases—to become successful there. Around 1550, some 10 percent of Portugal’s population were people from Africa, and not all of them were mere servants or performing menial tasks.

Slavery was known in most African cultures long before the arrival of the Europeans. Usually these slaves were people who had been taken prisoner as spoils of war. The Arab slave trade had also been in existence for a long time already. Such slaves were, however, as a rule treated as members of the family that “owned” them, albeit with limited rights, and not as commodities that could be treated even worse than animals.

— **The West African historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo (1922–2006) wrote:**

*On the whole, slaves were integrated reasonably soon in the family [of the owner] ... the slaves therefore enjoyed certain civic as well as ownership rights; court cases regarding the freedom of slaves occurred frequently, and many of those were due to the initiative of the slave himself. In the Congo region there were in fact even slaves who owned slaves in their own right... It is therefore ridiculous to claim that the Europeans just continued an already existing practice.*³

¹ This chapter was previously published in Lutz van Dijk, *A History of Africa* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2004), 90–95, and has been slightly edited here.

² Some words in this chapter appear in quotation marks as they come from contemporary writings and indicate how people in Europe thought at the time. In spite of their derogatory connotations these words have been retained here, even though they should no longer be used today.

³ *Histoire de l’Afrique noire: D’hier à demain*, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie A. Hatier, 1972), 208; English see note 1.

A radical change took place when the Europeans in North, Central, and South America started to establish large plantations for the cultivation of especially cotton, tobacco, and sugar cane. In order to increase profits they were making even further, the plantation owners urgently required ever more laborers. The original inhabitants of the Americas could not be considered for this purpose. Almost everywhere they had been dispossessed of their land and their numbers reduced through genocide and infectious European diseases, which further and demoralized them.

Within a very short period an evil alliance developed (one could describe it as a sort of mafia) between Europeans, Arab and African traders to profit from this situation. With their complete contempt for basic human rights, they gave an entirely new meaning to the word “slave.” Slaves were no longer merely people with an inferior status and few (if any) rights, but no more than a tradable commodity to be bought, transported to the market, and sold at a profit. This monopoly, initially controlled by the Portuguese, was soon challenged by other European powers. Ships from Spain, England, France, and the Netherlands began to appear on the coast of West Africa and for a time there were also Swedish, Danish, and German slave ships, vying with one another for to gain a share in the profitable slave trade.

For a time, Spain maintained a system whereby the number of slaves transported and the permits covering the trade in these people were sold “in an orderly manner” to other European states and to individual traders. In terms of this control mechanism the captives were no longer considered as individuals, but measures as a tonnage. The first such permit (*asiento*) was awarded in 1518, while a document dating from as late as 1696 gave permission to the Portuguese Guinea Company to transport “10,000 tons of Negroes” annually.

Visitors to West Africa today can still see the fortresses along the coast which were used for the slave trade. These forts were equipped with heavy artillery—not to defend them against attacks from Africans, but because the Europeans had to defend themselves against each other. All along the coast, they stand as innumerable silent witnesses to this gruesome period in Africa’s history. Millions of children, women, and men were caged together in these forts before being shipped overseas. From these forts they saw their continent for the last time. Conservatively, it has been estimated that about eight million Africans—though the figure is probably closer to 15 million— were shipped off in the most dehumanizing manner as slaves. No statistics are available to prove how many died as they were hunted by slave traders or how many died during the long sea voyages under horrendous circumstances and were summarily thrown overboard.

— The first slave who not only managed to buy his freedom at the age of twenty-one, but also wrote a book about it, which was published in England in 1789 and played a considerable role in the abolition of slavery, was Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797). Here he recalls how he arrived on the slave ship as an eleven-year-old captive:

I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. ... When I looked round the ship too and saw ... a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. When I recovered a little I found some black people about me, who I believed were some of those who brought me on board, and had been receiving their pay; they talked to me in order to cheer me, but all in vain.

I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair. They told me I was not; and one of the crew brought me a small portion of spirituous liquor in a wine glass. ... I took a little down my palate, which, instead of reviving me, as they thought it would, threw me into the greatest consternation at the strange feeling it produced, having never tasted any such liquor before. Soon after this the blacks who brought me on board went off, and left me abandoned to despair.⁴

A slave ship with a crew of thirty sailors and five officers could have as many as five hundred slaves on board. The voyage across the Atlantic Ocean lasted at least five weeks, but could often take as long as three months. Many of the captives tried to escape or—when escape had become impossible—to commit suicide. Some preferred to jump into the sea rather than endure more suffering. Those who could find no other way out refused to eat and tried to kill themselves in this way.

An English captain of a slave ship noted that a hunger strike was considered a very serious offence. When someone refused to eat “first his mouth was forced open by placing a hot coal next to his lips and then a metal funnel was inserted in this throat through which the food was forced down.” A ship’s surgeon recommended that “ships should rather leave the coast of Africa at night. In this way many of the slaves would only realize the next day that their homeland was already out of sight, so that the weeping and the hysterical screaming

⁴ Olaudah Equiano [1789], *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, published here as *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta, (New York: Penguin, 2003), 55–56.

especially of the women, would not cause a disturbance when further loads have to be taken aboard.”

In some cases slaves tried to offer resistance on the high seas. Usually such uprisings were easy to quell and the instigators were tortured before being thrown into the sea. The captain of one of the slave ships regretted that a mutiny had caused “eighty unruly Negroes having to be shot or drowned on the spot. Much worse was the fact that the remaining cargo was so badly wounded that their wounds became swollen and festering. Most of them refused to receive any treatment and even tore open their wounds so that they could bleed to death or die of infection and so become useless to us.”

Only one case is known of a successful mutiny. This happened on board a Spanish slave ship. These events were used by the American film director Steven Spielberg (b. 1947) for the movie *Amistad*, which was released in 1997 and was to a large extent based on this event.

— **The slave mutiny on the *Amistad* in 1839:**

“We are people from Africa and there were born free...”

Early in 1839 the 25-year-old Sengbe Pieh of the Mende people (his first name has also been recorded as “Cinque” or “Singe”) was captured in the West African region known as Sierra Leone and sent to Cuba on a slave ship. There, he and 53 other captives from Sierra Leone, including women and men, was sold to two Spaniards as slaves. The Spaniards hired the slave ship Amistad (Spanish for ‘friendship’) under the command of Ramon Ferrer to ship the slaves to their work on the plantations.

Shortly after their departure Sengbe Pieh managed to wriggle out of his chains and free some of his comrades. They quietly made their way to the sleeping sailors and took their weapons away. Then they attacked Ferrer and killed him and another man. Sengbe Pieh then took over command of the ship and it looked as if the sailors were indeed following his orders to sail back to Africa. But two of the Spaniards, Pedro Montez and José Ruiz, managed to deceive Sengbe Pieh and his comrades. Instead of sailing east, the Amistad sailed north. After about 60 days they reached a cool, misty coast—not of Africa but of Long Island, New York. With the help of American marines, the two Spaniards managed to regain control of the confused and exhausted Africans. They were charged with mutiny and murder and the Spaniards demanded that “their slaves,” as they referred to them, be returned to them. This demand had the support of the Queen of Spain.

By this time, slavery was prohibited in New York and in some of the northern states of the United States of America. In most of the southern states slavery would be abolished only later, even though there had been a movement in favor of total abolition of slavery for a long time.

The abolitionists managed to swing public opinion in favor of the Africans. Arrangements were made to find a Mende interpreter for the court case. The abolitionists' central argument was that the Africans should be set free since they had only exercised a right which all free people possess, namely to defend their freedom.

The court case lasted several months and the case was eventually referred to the American supreme court. Public opinion became increasingly divided and the Amistad issue developed into a watershed case in the struggle for the abolition of slavery in the United States.

The turnaround came when Sengbe Pieh made an impassioned plea in Mende, which was translated. In his statement to the court he said among other things: "We are people of Africa and there were born free. Since the day of our birth we were free and had the right to be free. That is why we must remain free and not be slaves." This statement was adopted almost verbatim by the defense.

The abolitionists eventually succeeded in persuading a former American president, John Quincy Adams (1767–1848), to act as counsel for the defense. At the age of 73, ailing and already half blind, his plea of more than eight hours eventually led to the acquittal of the former slaves. Their passage back to Sierra Leone was paid for and at the beginning of 1842 the 35 remaining members of the original group of 53 went home. The others had already died during the long voyage to America and during the long court case.

Slavery was officially abolished in Britain and its colonies in 1833 by an Act of Parliament, and throughout the United States not until 1863, after the victory of the northern over the southern states in the American Civil War. In many other countries slaves were freed only much later, well into the twentieth century. Saudi Arabia, for instance, only abolished slavery in 1963. Slavery still exists today, although no longer officially. Cases of child slavery still come to light, especially in Asia and Africa, but also in Eastern Europe, where impoverished parents often see no alternative but to sell their children. Often, false promises are made to these parents, but the children are ultimately used for child labor or prostitution.

For Africa, the abduction over centuries of millions of the healthiest and strongest people was a human and economic tragedy. One can hardly imagine the scope of this tragedy, and the people who were responsible for it have never been called to account. This is no other continent from which so many people were forcibly abducted. The children and the grandchildren of the African slaves grew up thousands of kilometers away from their ancestral homes. Besides Brazil and the United States of America, people of African origin today live in countries such as Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Granada, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Belize, Nicaragua, Panama, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Suriname, and Guyana.

Africans and people of African origin who live away from their continent can today be found right across the globe.

Would it have been possible to prevent the criminal abduction of millions of people from Africa? Was there no African nation or country able to resist exploitations by Europeans successfully?

pp. 242–245:

The Arab Spring in the North: The Impatience of Youth

The desperate protest of Mohamed Bouazizi (26)

It all began with Mohamed Bouazizi (1984–2011), the young street vendor from Tunisia:

When Mohamed was only three, his father, a construction worker, died. A while later his mother married an uncle, who was usually out of work for health reasons by the time Mohamed was in school. Together with his five siblings, Mohamed attended a village school in a one-room schoolhouse. At the age of ten, he did all kinds of agricultural jobs in order to contribute as much as he could to feed the impoverished family. As a result he often missed school and as a teenager he ultimately quit school entirely (some media later reported that he had attended university, but his sister has emphasized that they had been mistaken).

He rented a room in the small city of Sidi Bouzid, about 12 miles from his home village, hoping to find a job. His application for military service was rejected. Finally Mohamed decided to pull a small wooden cart through the city selling produce. He often worked more than fourteen hours a day, but he was able to build up a base of regular

customers and managed to earn the equivalent of roughly US\$140 per month. In addition to covering his own costs for room and board, he also supported his mother in the village, his ailing uncle, and his younger siblings. Moreover, he contributed to the university fees for an older sister.

No money remained even to pay for a license for his modest trade. Although he tried to be cautious, he was nevertheless frequently stopped by police and fined. His wares were also confiscated sometimes. In Sidi Bouzid, a small city with a population of about 40,000, some 160 miles southwest of Tunis, the capital city, the unemployment rate is more than 30 percent and corruption is widespread. Mohamed Bouazizi refused to pay bribes.

On Thursday evening, December 16, 2010, he bought more vegetables than usual. He set out with his filled cart the next morning at 8 a.m. Around 10:30 he was stopped by police. This time they went a step further than they usually did: They confiscated not only his produce, but also his wooden cart and an electric scale he had recently bought. On that day the action taken against the vendor was led by a 45-year-old municipal inspector who ridiculed him—and some witnesses later said she even slapped him.

Mohamed did not give up. Desperate, he went to the city authorities to lodge a formal complaint with the governor and demand the return of his property, at least the cart and the costly scale. Neither the governor nor any other officials present was willing to speak with him. When he still refused to give up the police were again called and they removed him from the premises and banned him from entering.

Mohamed then went to a nearby shop and bought two bottles of paint thinner. Around 11:30 a.m., only an hour after the altercation with the police, he returned to the entrance of the municipal offices and called out: “How do you expect me to make a living?” and then he doused himself with the paint thinner and set himself on fire.

There were a lot of people on the square in front of the Sidi Bouzid municipal offices that day. Most of them stared in horror as the young man went up in flames. One man tried in vain to extinguish the flames with water. A short time later Mohamed lost consciousness and collapsed. When an ambulance finally arrived, severe burns already covered 90 percent of Mohamed’s body.

Miraculously he was still alive, although he never regained consciousness from his coma. He was transferred twice to special hospitals. The news of his self-immolation spread throughout not only the country, but all of the Arab world. Many young people in other countries of North Africa and the Middle East identified with Mohamed: Like him they too

are unemployed or earn very little in bad jobs. And like him they consider the state authorities to be arrogant and corrupt.

Tunisia's president Zine el Abidine ben Ali (b. 1936), who had been in office for more than twenty-three years, quickly realized that this was far bigger than the protest of a street vendor. He had TV cameras film him in the ICU visiting the unconscious Mohamed Bouazizi, who had been unknown up to then. But protests against Ben Ali and his corrupt government were taking place almost every day, also in other parts of the country, primarily by young people like Mohamed.

In the afternoon of January 4, 2011, Mohamed finally died of his injuries. About 5000 people attended his funeral, which was closely guarded by the police. Nevertheless people continued to shout chants such as: "Farewell, Mohamed, ... We weep for you today, we will make those who caused your death weep." In the days that followed, hundreds of thousands of young people protested all over the country, also in the capital city of Tunis.

On January 13, 2011, President Ben Ali announced that he would not run for reelection in the 2014 elects and he would allow greater freedom of the press effective immediately. However, the country's military leadership had already decided to abandon him. Just one day later, and only ten days after Mohamed's funeral, the military allowed Ben Ali and his wife and three children to escape and then closed the airport.

Ben Ali's plane flew first to France, where he was not permitted to land. Ultimately, the conservative Kingdom of Saudi Arabia granted him exile, where he still lives today. On June 20, 2011, a Tunisian court sentenced him and his wife in absentia to thirty-five years in prison for embezzlement and misuse of public funds and for unlawful possession of money and jewelry worth millions of dollars. Most Tunisians—young and old alike—breathed a sigh of relief, since it was possible to fight a revolution without bloodshed. What soon become known as the Arab Spring had begun.

pp. 260–265:

Fortress Europe: Share or Kill?

There have never been so many refugees since the end of the Second World War in 1945 as there are today. Roughly 50 million people have left their homes with the few possessions they could carry and are fleeing hunger, war, and persecution. Half of them are children under

eighteen years of age. They give up all they have, often risking their lives, just to escape from where conditions are even worse.

—— **“That corresponds to the catch of a Senegalese fisherman who goes out in his boat every day for fifty-five years....” Moustapha Diallo (b. 1965 in Kaolack, Senegal) studied German Studies in Dakar and later in Austria, Germany, and France, taught at the University of Paderborn, and works today as a translator and journalist (among other things, as editor and co-author of the book *Visionäre Africas* [Africa’s Visionaries], **Wuppertal: Peter Hammer, 2014**):**

I would like to begin with a story that can stand for many stories of flight from Africa. It is about the village of Ndioudiouf in my homeland of Senegal. About 165 people lived there back then.

Five years ago, forty-eight of them, mostly teenagers and young adults, got together and decided to build a boat. They were all from this fishing village or its environs and they did not want to have to rely on the familiar floating coffins. After working for months they set out to sea bound for Spain. The entire village had gathered on the beach, since at least one member every family was part of the crew. The boat never arrived in Europe. The village never celebrated another festival, wedding, baptism, or anything that would be a joyful occasion. It is today a traumatized village.

More interesting than the question as to what they wanted in Europe is the question as to how they got the idea. Why did they all set off together?

A few years earlier the European Union had secured fishing rights for Senegalese waters. What that means for local fishers can be seen in the following statistics:

The catch of a European trawler on one day corresponds to what a Senegalese fisherman catches if he goes out in his boat every day for fifty-five years. This agreement destroyed the livelihood of entire villages.

Most African refugees never arrive in the affluent countries. Eighty-six percent of refugees worldwide are taken in by poorer countries, often neighboring countries, where conditions are not all that much better, but where the direct threat seems somewhat smaller. The refugees often endure there for years in wretched, huge tent camps, with thousands—frequently tens of thousands—of other desperate people crowded together in the tightest of space.

In Africa, most refugees currently come from Somalia, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic. There are also increasing numbers

from the countries of North Africa, where the Arab Spring has turned into an autumn. Very few of them make it to Europe. Of the many millions of refugees only about 100,000 reach the North African coast each year and a bit more than 40,000 attempt to flee further from there to Spain (or the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in northern Morocco) or on ramshackle and overloaded boats to southern France, Italy, or Greece.

There are no reliable statistics about how many of them die each year: According to various human rights organizations, roughly 600 refugees drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in 2013; the figure rose to 3,400 in 2014; and the numbers keep increasing. From January to April 2015 about 1,700 people drowned. On the night of April 18 alone the death toll exceeded 900. The number of people who attempted to flee illegally in 2014 from North Africa to southern Europe has meanwhile been corrected upwards to 175,000. People usually hear about only the most spectacular catastrophes, such as the one off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa on October 3, 2013.

—— **Eyewitness account of an older resident of Lampedusa on the night following the tragedy on October 3, 2013, when only 155 of 545 refugees could be rescued, and 390 drowned: “They were so close to us along the coast that for a long time in the dark we could only hear their screams, but they were so far that we could not see them ... until it got quieter and quieter and finally fell silent.”**

The Italian island of Lampedusa is only eighty miles from the Tunisian coast. Sicily, on the other hand, is roughly another 125 miles away. It is a small island of around 8 square miles: about 5.5 miles from east to west, and around 1.8 miles wide.

Only about 6,500 people live permanently on the island. That figure roughly doubles in the summer due to tourists. Aside from tourism, most Lampedusans live from fishing and canned fish production. The people are generally hard-working and friendly; they are not very open to right-wing extremism and even chased away politicians like Marine Le Pen (b. 1968) of France, when she attempted to misuse the problems on the island for xenophobic propaganda.

Many island dwellers understand the hardship facing the—meanwhile 25,000—stranded refugees. When in January 2009 a few hundred broke out of a detention camp (which was built for 600 people but almost 2000 were detained there), some locals protested along with the refugees against the policies in Rome and Brussels, which together misused them as “outposts of Fortress Europe.”

The tragedy on the night of October 3, 2013, was not the first disaster but it was the worst. On board a boat only 65 feet long were 545 refugees, largely from Eritrea, Somalia, and Ghana. They had set out from the Libyan coast, almost 200 miles away. After the engine failed the captain set a blanket on fire as an emergency signal, but the fire quickly got out of control. Panic ensued and too many passengers ran to one side of the boat, causing it to capsize. Three hundred ninety children, women, and men drowned; most of them could not swim.

Many of them had saved for a long time for this attempt to escape. It was later revealed that human traffickers had charged up to 3000 US dollars per adult, which had been paid in advance. The Tunisian captain was charged with manslaughter. A public prosecutor initially introduced proceedings against all the survivors for illegal immigration, but they were later withdrawn due to numerous protests.

— **Giuseppina Nicolini (b. 1961), the mayor of Lampedusa, had previously already spoken out for the human rights of the boat refugees. On television she said:**

This is not the first tragedy. But up to now most of them remained relatively invisible to the world, since it always concerned only poor people. When eleven Africans drowned recently, no one reported on it. Imagine what would happen if a luxury liner had an emergency at sea and eleven wealthy passengers drowned. All the news stations around the world would have reported on the event. Now, almost 400 poor people had to die before the problem received any international attention.

Only a short time later did it become clear just how right she was, when on October 11, 2013, another refugee boat capsized, this time one that had set out for Lampedusa from Malta, carrying 240 passengers, 34 of whom drowned. Mayor Nicolini, however, managed by the end of October 2013 to convince the Italian government to establish the “Mare Nostrum” rescue program in coordination with the navy, the coast guard, and civilian organizations for boat refugees. To today not only were thousands of refugees rescued, but it was possible to better control illegal human trafficking.⁵ Mayor Nicolini emphasized in a number of

⁵ Only one year later, in late October 2014, the Italian government announced that the Mare Nostrum program was discontinued (after rescuing around 150,000 people since it was launched in October 2013—that is roughly 400 per day). “Italy has done its duty,” declared the Italian Ministry of the Interior. Mare Nostrum is now being superseded by the EU “Triton” program, which is considerably smaller and operates only off European coasts. It also responds only to emergencies but does not itself take action. Refugee organizations presume that the number of deaths will again multiply.

interviews: *“We have to stop administering first aid only after a disaster takes place. The people who are risking their lives are doing it because the catastrophe they are living through is much worse. We in Europe must finally understand that.”*

The reasons for someone to flee often cannot be separated from international economic agreements that are largely responsible for the fact that people leave their homeland in dire need, as Moustapha Diallo illustrated using the example of a Senegalese village. Frequently it is the same politicians who “merely” represent their own so-called national interests who later demand most radically that the “flood” of refugees be stopped.

Human rights organizations also emphasize that the EU isolationist policies aim to keep out poverty and not initially a nationality. To illustrate this they mention the visa policies of several European countries that issue residence permits without further ado to the wealthy. Thus in Spain and Portugal, for instance, anyone who invests at least €500,000 in real estate can receive a European residence permit. In Hungary, anyone who offers the state an interest-free loan of at least €250,000 can receive a residence visa for the Schengen countries.

Pope Francis (b. 1936) spoke of a “globalization of indifference” when he visited Lampedusa in July 2013. And after the tragedy of October 3 he expressly praised the residents of Lampedusa and their mayor, who showed simple “human kindness” through their solidarity with the many refugees on their small island.