



American Slavery, 1619-1877

By Peter Kolchin

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A concise, engaging overview of American slavery from the beginning of the colonial era to emancipation and its aftermath. Kolchin takes a broad geographical perspective, putting American slavery in the context of a general trend toward use of forced labor on the periphery of an expanding Europe. This incisive synthesis fills a major gap for the general reader and for historians, who will find it both stimulating and appealing.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this readable synthesis of scholarship, University of Delaware history professor Kolchin takes a judicious view of historians' controversies surrounding this topic. Kolchin (*Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom*) offers a good narrative account of American slavery, but the book is most useful for his historiographical navigation. While some scholars have argued that slaves quickly abandoned African ways, and others maintain that slave culture was strongly African, Kolchin disputes this dichotomy, describing instead the development of a unique African American culture. Likewise, Kolchin sees the validity of studies that have focused on slaves as victims as well as more recent work emphasizing their resiliency. With perspective drawn from his research into the end of slavery in other countries, Kolchin stresses that Reconstruction, once seen by scholars as cruel to Southern whites and more recently as insufficiently revolutionary, was in fact "an extraordinary departure" that took control of the mechanics of emancipation away from the former masters.

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From Kirkus Reviews

In a lively interpretive history, Kolchin (History/Univ. of Delaware) succinctly traces America's institution of slavery from its Colonial beginnings to the Reconstruction era. American slavery, Kolchin explains, didn't develop in isolation but evolved as part of a trend toward forced labor in the New World colonies, especially in the Caribbean and Brazil. In Colonial America, "the initial demand for labor was precisely that--for labor--and was largely color-blind." Most forced laborers were indentured servants from Great Britain; although some slavery existed as early as the founding, in the early 17th century, of the Virginia colony, not until that century's close were Africans imported in large numbers as slaves. Kolchin reveals that, while the plantation slavery of what was to become the South developed distinctively (and primarily to cultivate tobacco and cotton), it had much in common with the plantation slavery of the Caribbean (where sugar was the primary crop). By about 1770, American slavery was concentrated mostly in the South, though it existed in all of the American colonies, and, as time passed, relationships between slaves and masters changed as second-generation slaves lost much of their African culture and became Americanized. In the US--in contrast to the Caribbean--slaves lived longer, developed considerable occupational diversity, and became acculturated, particularly in their absorption of Protestantism. The Revolutionary era saw slavery threatened by Enlightenment ideology, but the institution survived more strongly than ever in the South and, during the 19th century, came to be perceived as fundamental to the Southern economy and way of life. Kolchin writes about slave life through the Civil War, and, not surprisingly, he sees slavery as leaving a legacy that has persisted throughout our own century. A clear and briskly written survey that puts slavery in context and explains its continuing impact on American life. -- *Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Review

"Peter Kolchin's *American Slavery* is the best history of the 'peculiar institution' that I have ever read. Paying equal attention to the slaves and the slaveholders, it is both comprehensive and fair-minded. A master of comparative history, Kolchin brilliantly shows how American slavery was similar to, and at the same time different from, forced labor in Brazil, the Caribbean, and Russia. His splendid bibliographical essay is an indispensable guide to the vast and complex literature on slavery."--David Herbert Donald, Charles Warren Professor of American History Emeritus, Harvard University

"This is a brilliant and masterful synthesis of scholarship on the history of slavery in America. Kolchin not only pulls together all the relevant literature but also strikes out with his own perceptive and trenchant analyses.--August Meier, Kent State University

"A feast of deftly crafted interpretations of the many interrelated dimensions of a most complex institution that shaped and deeply scarred American society. Kolchin's masterful survey is by far the best I have seen. It will be hard to surpass."--David Barry Gaspar, Duke University

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