

Black History Month in the French-, Spanish- and German-speaking world

Black History Month (BHM) aims to recognise the contribution and achievements of people of African or Caribbean heritage. It also presents an opportunity to learn more about the effects of racism and how to challenge negative stereotypes.

BLACK HISTORY IS HISTORY

Not everyone agrees that celebrating BHM goes far enough to address racism and prejudice in society. Many people say that confining Black History to a single month encourages tokenistic representations and othering, and that Black History should instead be a crucial and integrated part of our collective history every month of the year.

BHM IN THE UK

Whereas in the US the expansion of BHM can be traced back to the 1970s and is celebrated in the month of February (to coincide with the births of President Abraham Lincoln and social activist Frederick Douglass), in the UK BHM has been celebrated since the late 1980s in the month of October. It was first celebrated in the UK in October 1987, which was also the 150th anniversary of Caribbean emancipation and the African Jubilee Year.

But have you ever wondered about how Black History Month is celebrated in France, Germany and Spain?

BLACK HISTORY IN EUROPE

Black people have been part of European imagination and reality from very early times, long before the notion of race gained authority in later modern times during the period of European colonisation. Some of the most famous figures of European modern history are Black or have African heritage, but their heritage has been overlooked in history books over the centuries. Much of what we understand as European identity can be understood as an interaction between African and European cultures and identities.

BHM provides an opportunity to amplify these figures and also to reimagine how we understand Black History in the context of Europe more generally.



How is BHM celebrated in France, Germany and Spain?

SPAIN – INTERNATIONAL DAY OF WOMEN OF AFRICAN HERITAGE

Spain doesn't officially celebrate Black History Month but *Día Internacional de la Mujer Afrodescendiente* (International Day of Women of African Heritage) is celebrated annually on 25 July. This event is aligned to Africa's Women's Day, an event that dates back to 1962, and the Pan-African Women's Organization (PAWO) conference in Tanganyika (present-day Tanzania). In Spain, there is a growing movement of films, books and articles being made about the history of Black people in Spain (see the film resource in the Useful links section below, which examines the African influence on flamenco, and on Spanish society more generally).



Arabesque Moorish architecture of the Patio de los Leones (Court of the Lions), Palacios Nazaries, in the Alhambra.

© 123RF Cezary Wojtkowski



Madrid, Spain, 7th June, 2020. A group of Black women and men protest racism close to metro station, Sevilla, in Calle de Alcalá, the longest street of Madrid.

© Alamy Stock Photo

Five things you might not know about Black History in Spain

- There is a long history of African influence in Spain. For thousands of years, people have travelled back and forth between Spain and North Africa, and the blending of artistic, cultural and religious traditions likely started before records began.
- In AD 711, Islamic North Africans (Moors) colonised the Iberian Peninsula (al-Ándalus) and ruled for over 700 years.
- There are over 4,000 Arabic and Arabic-derived words in the Spanish language.
- The Moors introduced many of the ingredients that are considered Spanish staples, including oranges, lemons and figs, saffron and rice.
- Pablo Picasso, arguably Spain's most famous artist, spent many years exploring African art. The Cubist movement was heavily influenced by the aesthetics of traditional West and Central African sculpture.



An old building with Moorish influence in Algeciras (Cadiz province, Andalusia, Spain).

© Alamy Stock Photo



Interior with Moors 1870 by Francisco Lameyer, Spain.

© Alamy Stock Photo



Barcelona, Spain, 7th June, 2020. Protesters hold an anti-racism rally outside the Catalan Parliament. The demonstration was organized by the Black African and Afrodescendant Community in Spain (CNAAE).

© Alamy Stock Photo

BLACK HISTORY MONTH IN GERMANY

In Germany, BHM is celebrated in the month of February. The celebration was started over 30 years ago in 1990 by the Initiative of Black People in Germany (Initiative *Schwarze Menschen* in Deutschland). While the events started in Berlin, they have since spread to Hamburg, Frankfurt and Munich. The events bring together people from different backgrounds, including Germans with Caribbean, Latin American and African heritage, as well as other People of Colour who subscribe to the term 'Black' as a political identity for solidarity against racism. Themes for the events in previous years have included Black German History and African literature in Europe.



Hannover, Germany, 6th June, 2020. Peaceful Black lives matter & anti racism protest outside the Opernplatz Theater after the death of George Floyd.

© Alamy Stock Photo



Portrait of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963) by James E. Purdy, 1907. Du Bois was an American sociologist, socialist, historian and civil rights activist.

© Alamy Stock Photo

Five things you might not know about Black History in Germany

- German colonisation of Africa took place in two distinct periods in history. Modern Chad, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Mozambique, Nigeria, the Central African Republic and the Republic of the Congo have all been under the control of Germany at various points.
- Ghana-born philosopher, Anton Wilhelm Amo, was the first African-born person known to have attended a European university (1721–1727). Amo studied (and then became a professor) at the Universities of Halle and Jena. In 2020, Mohrenstraße, a street in central Berlin, was renamed Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße in his honour.
- American writer and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois studied at the University of Berlin in 1892 and later wrote that he experienced less prejudice and discrimination than in the US.
- Martin Luther King, Jr. visited both East and West Berlin in 1964.
- In 1999, Hans Massaquoi published an autobiography recounting his harrowing experiences of being a Black child in Nazi Germany.



Berlin, Germany, 2nd July 2021. Demonstrators attend a Black Lives Matter protest.

© Alamy Stock Photo



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the Soviet Sector border of the Wall in Bernauer Straße. Herr Werner Steltzer, director of the Berlin Information Center, is indicating points of interest, 1964

© Alamy Stock Photo

FRANCE – LOI TAUBIRA AND NATIONAL DAY OF REMEMBRANCE FOR SLAVERY

Despite the fact that France has no established Black History Month, 20 years ago it became the first country in the world to recognise slavery as a crime against humanity through the *Loi Taubira* (Taubira Law). On 10 May, the anniversary of the adoption of the law in parliament, France commemorates the abolition of Black slavery in the French colonies. This day is called the National Day of Remembrance for Slavery (*Journée nationale des mémoires de la traite, de l'esclavage et de leurs abolitions*).



Large group of French and African soldiers together in camp during the First World War.

© Alamy Stock Photo



Black French and francophone World War 2 troops being cheered on by French civilians.

© Alamy Stock Photo



Marseille, France, 6th June, 2020. A protester holds a placard during the demonstration against racism and police violence.

© Alamy Stock Photo

Five things you might not know about Black History in France

- One of the most famous French authors, Alexandre Dumas, was a Person of Colour, whose father was born into slavery. Dumas wrote *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers*.
- France officially abolished slavery in 1794 but it continued to be practised in the French colonies until 1848.
- Hundreds of thousands of Black French and francophone troops fought in the World Wars.
- In the early to mid-20th century, many African Americans saw France as a refuge and several intellectuals, writers, artists and musicians, including Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Josephine Baker, made it their home.
- Franz Fanon was a psychiatrist, intellectual and revolutionary who was born in the French colony of Martinique in 1925. He wrote about the effects of colonialism and oppression and his work has heavily influenced the fields of post-colonial studies, critical theory and Marxism.



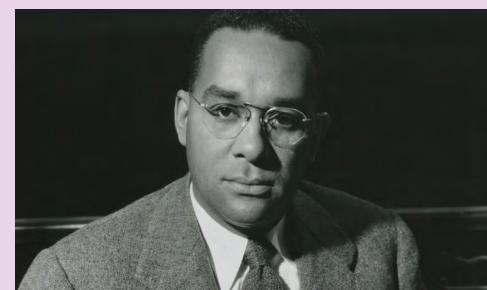
Alexandre Dumas (Dumas Davy de la Pailleterie, 1802 – 1870) also known as Alexandre Dumas père (father), was a French writer. His works have been translated into many languages, and he is one of the most widely read French authors.

© Alamy Stock Photo



Place de la République, Paris, France, 13th June, 2020. Protesters hold signs during a Black Lives Matter protest.

© Alamy Stock Photo



Richard Wright was the author of *Native Son* (1940), the first bestselling novel by an African American. Photo taken in Paris, shortly after Wright moved there in 1947, never to return to the US.

© Alamy Stock Photo

BEYOND EUROPE!

El mundo hispanohablante and *la Francophonie* are terms used to describe the Spanish- and French-speaking worlds. There are an estimated 30 million people who speak French outside of France, the majority of whom are African. There are more than ten times the number of Spanish speakers who live outside of Spain than there are residents of Spain. The majority of Spanish speakers live in the Americas. The reason for this is that both the French and Spanish Empires colonised countries in these regions and imposed their language upon the native people. Explore how BHM is celebrated throughout Latin America in the YouTube resource listed in the 'useful links' section below.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Why is it important to learn about Black History? What is the impact of learning about Black History on students like you and your classmates today? What is the impact of learning about Black History on wider society?
- What have you already learned about Black History in school? Has all the Black History you have been taught related to slavery or colonialism?
- Some governments officially recognise BHM whereas others do not. What is your response to this? How important is it that governments officially recognise BHM?
- Are there other groups or communities which you think should have 'History Month' celebrations?
- BHM is celebrated at different times in different countries. Is there a particular month in the calendar which you feel lends itself to BHM? Why?
- Campaigners have increasingly called for Black History to be included in the curriculum, and not just celebrated in October. What is your response to this?
- Do you think that more needs to be done to acknowledge and celebrate Black History in Europe and/or the wider Spanish/French/German-speaking world?

LANGUAGE TASK

The following terms are useful for having conversations about race in Spanish, French and German.

Challenge: Match up the English translations and the definitions of the terms with the Spanish, French or German terms in the list. The first one has been done for you!

Extra challenge: Have a go at doing this in the language(s) you aren't studying. Are there any similarities between the words? Are there any terms or concepts that differ between the languages? Do you notice any patterns?

Terms for having conversations about race in Spanish

Spanish	English	Definition
la igualdad	equality	the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, or opportunities
la discriminación		
la justicia		
el racismo sistémico		
la Historia Negra		
la diáspora africana		
el colonialismo		
las vidas negras importan		
el prejuicio		

English	Definitions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black Lives Matter • Black History • discrimination • systemic racism • colonialism • African diaspora • equality • prejudice • justice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • racially discriminatory practices of systems, structures and institutions (educational, economic, health, political, etc.) • unfair treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of ethnicity, age, sex, sexuality or disability • fair behaviour or treatment • the collective worldwide communities of people with African heritage • the whole series of past events connected with Black people • a movement formed to campaign against systemic racism and violence against Black people • the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, or opportunities • preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience • political and economic domination involving the control of a country and its people by a foreign power

Terms for having conversations about race in French

French	English	Definition
l'égalité	equality	the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, or opportunities
la discrimination		
la justice		
le racisme systémique		
la négritude		
l'histoire des Noirs		
la diaspora africaine		
le colonialisme		
La vie des Noirs compte		
le préjugé		

English	Definitions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black Lives Matter • Black History • discrimination • systemic racism • colonialism • African diaspora • equality • prejudice • 'negritude' • justice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • racially discriminatory practices of systems, structures and institutions (educational, economic, health, political, etc.) • unfair treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of ethnicity, age, sex, sexuality or disability • fair behaviour or treatment • the collective worldwide communities of people with African heritage • the whole series of past events connected with Black people • a movement formed to campaign against systemic racism and violence against Black people • the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, or opportunities • preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience • political and economic domination involving the control of a country and its people by a foreign power • a literary and ideological movement, developed by francophone Black intellectuals, writers, and politicians, involving consciousness and pride of African heritage

Terms for having conversations about race in German

German	English	Definition
die Gleichberechtigung	equality	the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, or opportunities
die Diskriminierung		
die Gerechtigkeit		
der/die Afrodeutsche		
das Vorurteil		
der strukturelle Rassismus		
die Schwarze Geschichte		
der Kolonialismus		
Schwarze Leben zählen		
die afrikanische Diaspora		

English	Definitions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black Lives Matter • Black History • discrimination • systemic racism • African diaspora • colonialism • equality • prejudice • African-German • justice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • racially discriminatory practices of systems, structures and institutions (educational, economic, health, political, etc.) • unfair treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of ethnicity, age, sex, sexuality or disability • fair behaviour or treatment • the collective worldwide communities of people with African heritage • the whole series of past events connected with Black people • a movement formed to campaign against systemic racism and violence against Black people • the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, or opportunities • preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience • political and economic domination involving the control of a country and its people by a foreign power • a literary and ideological movement, developed by francophone Black intellectuals, writers, and politicians, involving consciousness and pride of African heritage

USEFUL LINKS

German

[ISD - Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland \(isdonline.de\)](https://www.isdonline.de)

French

[SOS Racisme - Touche pas à mon pote \(sos-racisme.org\)](https://www.sos-racisme.org)

[Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration \(histoire-immigration.fr\)](https://www.histoire-immigration.fr)

Spanish

[Gurumbe: Afro-Andalusian Memories](#)

[Afro Diccionario - YouTube](#)

[Black History Month In Latin America: How Much Do YOU Know? - YouTube](#)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lisa Panford is a Senior Lecturer at St Mary's University in Twickenham with over 14 years' experience teaching languages in Secondary schools in London. She has studied and worked in Spain and Peru. Lisa is passionate about counteracting discriminatory practices in the Secondary MFL classroom and is dedicated to the principle that all pupils should be given an opportunity to appreciate the enriching and transformative experience of studying languages. Lisa is a member of the Council for the Association for Language Learning and the Institute of Modern Languages Research.

Explore her recent publication entitled [Race and Racism in Secondary Modern Foreign Languages](#)



Explore the rest of our resources on [diversity and inclusion](#).

