

Name:

The Haitian Revolution

Introduction

Haitian Slave Revolt, uprising in 1791 by black slaves on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola. It began as a rebellion against slavery and French plantation owners, but became a political revolution that lasted for 13 years and resulted in independence from France. By 1804 the revolution had destroyed the dominant white population, the plantation system, and the institution of slavery in the most prosperous colony of the western hemisphere. The colony then became the first independent black republic in the world, the republic of Haiti.

The effects of the Haitian revolt spread far beyond the island. It contributed to the end of French colonial ambitions in the western hemisphere, which led France to sell its vast territory in North America to the United States in the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Refugees from Haiti settled in Louisiana, helping to establish that area's distinct French Creole culture. The uprising also inspired fear of similar revolts in other slave-holding areas of the Caribbean and the United States. Slaveholders in these areas isolated Haiti to keep the idea of emancipation from spreading. Haiti's isolation continued for more than 200 years.

The island of Hispaniola in the West Indies was the first land settled by explorer Christopher Columbus, who landed on Hispaniola in 1492. This colony became the center of Spanish activity in the Americas until Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés conquered Mexico in 1519. After that, Spanish attention turned to the highly developed civilizations of the American mainland, such as the Aztec Empire and the Inca Empire, where gold and silver was available. Hispaniola was left behind, a sparsely settled Spanish colony where the native people, the Arawak, had died from warfare, forced labor and the introduction of European diseases such as smallpox.

Within the next 150 years other European countries, notably England and France, settled the less populated Spanish colonies in the Caribbean. The western portion of Hispaniola was settled by French traders called buccaneers and in 1697 became the French colony of Saint-Domingue, which would later become Haiti. The eastern portion of the island remained Spanish and was called Santo Domingo (now the Dominican Republic).

Causes of the Revolution

By the late 1700s, the French colony of Saint-Domingue had developed into the richest European colony in the western hemisphere. With an extensive system of sugar and coffee plantations based on African slave labor, Saint-Domingue exported more wealth than all of the British North American colonies combined. A lively trade developed between North America and Saint-Domingue: New England merchants supplied the island with equipment, food, and horses in exchange for molasses, a byproduct of sugar processing, that was made into highly profitable rum.

By 1789 Saint-Domingue's population consisted of about 450,000 black slaves, 40,000 whites, and 28,000 free blacks and *mulattoes* (those of mixed black and white ancestry). The small white population was divided between an upper class of about 10,000 aristocrats and a middle class of about 30,000 shopkeepers, soldiers, artisans, and others. These two groups had little in common. Allied with the wealthy whites were the mulattoes, many of whom were offspring of the white elite and wanted to share in their privileges. Yet the mulattoes faced discrimination because of their racial background; in turn, they despised the black slaves, as did the whites.

While the upper class whites enjoyed a life of indulgence and luxury in Saint-Domingue, the black slaves had a harsh existence. Because they were laboring long hours in the fields of Saint-Domingue's sugar, coffee, and indigo plantations, many died of overwork and inadequate food. The death rate was high: More than 800,000 slaves were imported to the colony in the 1700s, yet in 1789 the population was about 450,000. Although officially protected by law from some abuse, in reality slaves could be tortured, mutilated, or killed by their owners. Most of Saint-Domingue's slaves were recent arrivals from Africa, not born into slavery in the colony, so they retained both the memory of freedom and elements of their cultures. The African religion of Vodun (also spelled Vodou or voodoo) was widely practiced among the slave population, even though it was outlawed in the colony. Vodun gave the slaves a form of cultural expression and rallying point for protest against their oppressors.

The Rebellion

The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 dramatically changed the wealthy French slave colony. The struggle that split France—between the old order, represented by the nobility and upper classes, and the revolutionary forces of the lower and middle classes—spilled over into the slave-holding colonies of the French West Indies. Saint-Domingue's white population was split: The elites were loyal to the king, while the middle class supported the revolutionaries, or Jacobins. The mulattoes, hoping to improve their lives, espoused the revolutionary ideals of liberty and equality for themselves, but not for the slaves. With the colony's rulers weakened by internal conflicts, the black slaves rebelled against their owners in 1791, killing whites and destroying plantations and crops.

The United States is in its first years as the first republic in the western hemispheres. Europe is in disarray as the French Revolution burns across the face of France. The revolutionaries in France are getting ready to draft the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which will declare rights, liberty, and equality to the basis of all legitimate government and social systems. On the French island of Haiti, far from anybody's eyes, French planters, craftsmen, soldiers, and administrators are all closely watching the events unfold across the Atlantic. It's an uncertain time; the results of the revolution are up in the air and loyalties are deeply divided. While they watch the events in France, however, the planters are unaware that a revolution is brewing beneath their very feet. For the French plantations on Haiti offers some of the cruelest conditions that African-American slaves ever had to suffer. They differ from North American plantations in one key element: the coffee and sugar plantations require vast amounts of labor. As a result, the slave population outnumbers the French by terrifying amounts; the slaves, also, by their sheer numbers are allowed to retain much of their culture and to establish more or less independent social systems. But the French, even with the example of the American and French revolutions, are blissfully unaware of the fire they're sitting on.

On August 22, 1791, the Haitian war of independence began in flames under the leadership of a religious leader named Boukman; over one hundred thousand slaves rose up against the vastly outnumbered and infinitely hated French. Unlike the French Revolution and the American Revolution, the Haitian revolution was entirely driven by the passions of men and women who had been enslaved most if not all of their lives. They didn't simply desire liberty they also wanted vengeance. Over the next three weeks, the Haitian slaves burned every plantation throughout the fertile regions of Haiti and executed all Frenchmen they could find. The French fled to the seacoast towns and pleaded with France to help them out while the island burned.

By 1793 the slave uprising had become a full-scale civil war. Seeking support to defeat the white elite, French revolutionary officials abolished slavery in the colony. Fierce fighting between the various groups continued, while Great Britain and Spain both sent invasion forces, hoping to take over the French colony.

In the midst of this confusion, a remarkable leader emerged in the colony. François Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture, a former slave, took part in the slave revolt and, with other black rebel leaders, joined forces with the Spanish army against the French. Highly skilled in military tactics and politics, Toussaint L'Ouverture rose to high rank within the Spanish army, but when France abolished slavery, he switched sides. Promoted to general in 1795 by French colonial officials, he helped drive out the Spanish.

By 1796, Toussaint L'Ouverture ruled the colony as the French governor-general. Over the next four years, he forced the British troops to withdraw and defeated his internal rivals, especially a mulatto group in the south that was destroyed in a bloody race war. By 1801 Toussaint L'Ouverture conquered Santo Domingo, the Spanish portion of the island, abolished slavery there, and proclaimed himself governor-general of the island for life. However, he did not declare independence but remained officially loyal to France. To rebuild the colony's economy, Toussaint L'Ouverture demanded that both whites and blacks continue to produce their crops without slavery.

Haitian Independence

As Toussaint L'Ouverture took charge in Saint-Domingue, Napoleon Bonaparte became the leader of France. Napoleon sought to return Saint-Domingue to French control and reinstate slavery as a means of bringing the colony back to its former prosperity. Napoleon sent a large army to Saint-Domingue to replace Toussaint with a trusted white general. Toussaint was tricked onto a ship and was taken to France, where he died in prison. However, the army that he had trained declared war on the French, led by two of Toussaint's subordinates, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe. After a bitter struggle, the former slaves defeated Napoleon's forces, massacred or drove all whites off the island, and changed the name of the colony to the aboriginal name "Haiti," which means "mountainous." The republic of Haiti, created by former slaves, declared its independence on January 1, 1804.

The new nation, however, faced continued division and economic hardship. Most of the plantation economy had been destroyed, and as much as half the population had fled or been killed. Dessalines declared himself leader for life, setting a precedent for many later Haitian rulers, but was assassinated in 1806. The following years in Haiti's history were marked by many years of violent struggles among different factions (*see* Haiti: History).

Haitian Independence Outcomes

The Haitian revolt and independence had far-reaching effects on the United States, as well as other nearby countries and colonies. During the turmoil, many refugees fled the island, pouring into seaports in the United States and the colony of Louisiana. These refugees from Saint-Domingue—white planters, mulatto artisans, and some African slaves—brought with them their language, religion, laws, newspapers, education, art, and their skills at growing sugar, all of which strongly influenced the culture of the lower South.

The French failure to regain control over Saint-Domingue also influenced Napoleon to abandon efforts to build an empire in the western hemisphere. In 1803 France sold its North American province of Louisiana, a region of 2,100,000 sq km (more than 800,000 sq mi) west of the Mississippi River, to the United States.

The success of Toussaint and the Haitians was a source of pride to many blacks in the United States and served as an example to some slaves who attempted unsuccessful uprisings in Virginia and South Carolina (*see* Denmark Vesey). Southern slave owners, hearing of the massacres that preceded Haitian independence, were convinced that freeing slaves would result in a race war and they became even less willing to end slavery peacefully. As the second independent nation in the western hemisphere (after the United States), Haiti gave support to Simón Bolívar, leader of the movement for South American independence from Spain in the early 1800s. In return, Bolívar made abolition of slavery one of the goals of his movement.

Toussaint

The great hero of the Haitian Revolution and a man considered one of the great revolutionaries and generals in his own time throughout America and Europe was François Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture. This man, whom all his European contemporaries compared to George Washington and later to Napoleon Bonaparte, was not even part of the original revolution. When the war of independence broke out in August, Toussaint was fifty years old. Having spent his life in slavery, he was entering old age as a carriage driver. Like so many other slaves, though, the revolution fired his passion and he discovered within himself a greatness that fired the imagination of both his contemporaries and distant Europeans.

He didn't participate in the burning of the plantations or the executions of the slave owners, but he rose to his own when he realized that the revolution could not hold unless the slaves became militarily and politically organized to resist outside pressures. His first move when he joined the revolution was to train a small military group. He then realized that the Haitian slaves, who now occupied the eastern 2/3 of Haiti (what is now the Dominican Republic), were caught between three contending European forces, all of which wanted Haiti for themselves. The French, of course, wanted Haiti back. The Spanish and English saw the revolution as an opportunity for seizing Haiti for themselves. Toussaint's great genius was to achieve what he wanted for the slaves by playing each of these powers off of each other, for they all realized that the slaves were the key to gaining Haiti. In the end, Toussaint allied his forces with the French, and Haiti remained part of France under the consulship of Toussaint.

Toussaint by all accounts was a brilliant and charismatic statesman and leader. Although Haiti was nominally under the control of France, in reality the Haitian Consul ran the island as a military dictator. Despite the fiery vengeance that animated the beginning of the revolution, Toussaint managed to maintain a certain level of racial harmony. In fact, he was as well loved by the French on Haiti as he was by the freed slaves. His reign, however, came to an end with the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte in France. Aside from the fact that Bonaparte did not like sharing power, he was also a deep-seated racist who was full of contempt for blacks. Napoleon sent General Victor Leclerc with over twenty thousand soldiers to unseat Toussaint, who then waged guerilla warfare against the French. Eventually he made peace with the French and retired from public life in 1802 on his own plantation. In 1803, the French tricked him into a meeting where he was arrested and sent to France. He died in prison in April of 1803.

Dessalines

With the death of Toussaint, Jean-Jacques Dessalines carried on the revolution. Unlike Toussaint, he was angry over his treatment as a slave and was determined not to allow its return. The war fought between Leclerc and Dessalines was, on both sides, one of the most horrifying struggles in history. Both resorted to atrocities. Leclerc was desperate, for his men were dying of yellow fever and the guerilla attacks took a surprising toll. So he decided to simply execute blacks whenever and wherever he found them. The slaughter that he perpetrated on non-combatants would not really be equaled until World War II; Leclerc's successor, Jean-Baptiste Rochambeau, simply continued this policy. Dessalines responded that every atrocity committed by the French would be revisited on the French. Such was how the war was waged. As the fighting wore on, Dessalines ordered the summary execution of all Europeans that opposed the new revolutionary government. During this time, Napoleon's government did little to help the harried French troops.

Finally, on November 28, 1803, Rochambeau surrendered and Dessalines declared Haiti to be a republic. He took the French three-colored flag and removed the white from the flag to produce the bi-colored flag of Haiti, the second republic of the Western hemisphere.

The response in North America was immediate. The Haitian Revolution suddenly changed the equation that had been operating in the North. Believing themselves to be kind and paternal and the slaves to be child-like and grateful,

white slave owners suddenly became aware of the tinderbox that they were sitting on. Although slave owners would publicly declare that slaves were, in fact, happy being slaves, in reality they knew otherwise. All throughout the southern United States, white slave owners began to build "slave shelters" to hide in should the slaves revolt. Many of them regularly occupied these shelters whenever they feared a slave revolt. Guns became bedside companions and fear became the rule of the day.

Questions Answer these questions as you read the article above.

1. What island is Haiti located on? What is unique about the culture of this island, even today?
2. How was there 800,000 slaves imported yet the population was only 450,000
3. What were some causes of the Haitian revolution?
4. What groups were fighting against each other in the Revolution?
5. What were the impacts or consequences of the Revolution?
6. What criteria does this Revolution meet for being a true revolution?
7. How did the following groups view the Haitian Revolution?
 - a. American slave owners
 - b. Black slaves in America
 - c. French revolutionaries
 - d. Absolute monarchs in Europe
8. Compare and contrast Toussaint and Dessalines. Discuss at least one similarity and one difference.