

The Haitian Revolution

Introduction

“The Haitian Revolution represents the most thorough case study of revolutionary change anywhere in the history of the modern world.”
– Franklin Knight

“...the Haitian Revolution—a revolution small numbers and geography. Nevertheless, it had enormous ramifications for the study of world history.”
– Howard Spodek

Economic

In 1789, the French colony of Saint Domingue was among the richest European colonies in the Americas. Its plantations produced sugar, cotton, indigo, and coffee. In fact, the colony produced 2/3 of French tropical imports and generated nearly 1/3 of all French foreign trade. The wealth rested on a brutal slave regime. St. Domingue’s harsh punishments and poor living conditions were notorious in the Caribbean. Because of high mortality rates and expanding demands for labor, the majority of the colony’s 500,000 slaves were African born.
– Richard W. Bulliet

St. Domingue produced close to 1/2 of all the sugar and coffee consumed in Europe and the Americas, as well as a substantial amount of cotton and indigo.
– David Geggus

Social Structure

40,000 white settlers, 30,000 *gens de couleur*, and 500,000 slaves

Whites were divided into two groups: *grand blancs* (“big whites”) who were planters (resident or absentee), merchants, lawyers, etc. and the *petit blancs* who were estate managers, artisans, shop clerks, inn keepers, sailors, etc.

Gens de couleur were free men of color. They outnumbered whites in 2 of the 3 colonial provinces. Most lived in the country, where they made up rural police force and militia. Some *gens de couleur* were wealthy, educated in France, and owned slaves (approximately 25% of all slaves in Haiti). However, anyone in St. Domingue with a black ancestor was subject to legal restrictions. The *gens de couleur* were banned from holding public office and certain occupations (lawyer, doctor, etc.), forbidden to wear fine clothing, and were not allowed to sit with whites in church or when eating.

Slaves—St. Domingue had the most slaves in the Caribbean. From 1785-1790, Haiti imported over 30,000 slaves from Africa annually. As a result, young men around twenty years-old comprised a significant portion of the black population. Bantu slaves known as “Congoes” were the largest African group and formed 1/3 of the population. Despised by *gens de couleur* for their African origins and customs. Run away slaves living in mountain communities were called maroons.

Influence of the American and French Revolutions

A special regiment of approximately 750 *gens de couleur* fought with the French and colonial soldiers at the Siege of Savannah on October 9, 1779. Among the Haitian soldiers was Henri Christophe who eventually became the first president of independent Haiti.

“No one doubts that the French Revolution of 1789 precipitated the colony’s destruction. If St. Domingue was a dormant volcano, as contemporaries liked to say, it needed only the shockwaves of the political earthquake in Paris to provoke its eruption.”
– David Geggus

Leaders of the Haitian Revolution

Vincent Ogé

Ogé was a light-skinned mulatto and leader of the Society of the Friends of the Blacks. Ogé lobbied the French National Assembly to give the *gens de couleur* political representation and voting rights. Ogé claimed he did not intend to weaken slavery. Instead, he argued that making free men of color equal to whites in political rights would strengthen their devotion to France and reinforce the system of slavery. White colonists were determined to keep the *gens de couleur* out of politics. In 1790, Vincent Ogé raised an army of 300 *gens de couleur* and demanded an end to racial discrimination. The uprising was crushed; he was captured by the French and suffered excruciating punishment by being broken on the wheel. His martyrdom made him a symbol for the cause of the *gens de couleur*.

Francois Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture

L'Ouverture was a self-educated former domestic slave. He offered to fight for the French if they would agree to free all of the slaves. With his help, the French army restored French control of St. Domingue after invasions by England and Spain. Many Africans joined his army. As a commander, he was brilliant at organization and diplomacy. His troops were well-trained and outlasted the slaughter of enemy troops. L'Ouverture eventually gained autonomous control of St. Domingue. In 1801, he issued a constitution for St. Domingue and declared himself governor for life. Napoleon in response sent forces to St. Domingue. Many of L'Ouverture's allies defected to the French side. In 1802, he was captured, sent to France where he died in prison.

Jean Jacques Dessalines

Dessalines served as L'Ouverture's inspector of agriculture. A menial slave, he disliked white society and spoke only *Creole*. He was a ruthless commander whose armies committed well-publicized atrocities against the French and their Haitian allies. His battle cry was "burn houses, cut off heads!" He achieved independence in 1804 for Haiti. He tried to expel all remaining Europeans and proclaimed himself emperor. He banned whites from owning land, as well as the cultivation of certain crops such as sugar.

Timeline of the Haitian Revolution

- 1789 Wealthy planters (*grand blancs*) seek local autonomy while *gens de couleur* demand equal rights with whites. Vincent Ogé goes to France to speak to the National Assembly.
- 1790 Whites fight whites for control of colonial assemblies. Ogé returns from France, organizes a military force, and demands an end to racial discrimination. He is captured, tortured, and executed by planter forces.
- 1791 National Assembly grants *gens de couleur* born of free parents equal rights to whites (including suffrage) Whites announce they will not honor the decree. Government power collapses. August Uprising. On August 14, slaves motivated by Boukman and armed with machetes march from plantation to plantation killing, looting, and burning the fields. 100,000 join the cause in the next two weeks. By the end of 1791, slaves killed 4,000 whites, burned 180 sugar plantations, and took control of 1/3 of the island.
- 1792 In March, the National Assembly grants equal rights to all free persons Jacobins send 7,000 troops to St. Domingue to stop the revolt; believe all whites are royalists or separatists French agents deport the governor and dissolve the colonial assembly; *gens de couleur* promoted to public office in an alliance with the Republic under the control of the Jacobins.
- 1793 At request of white planters, Great Britain invades St. Domingue August 1793, a Jacobin commissioner abolished slavery in Haiti in order to gain black allies High point of power by *gens de couleur*; now revolution is between the *gens de couleur* and black slaves
- 1794+ National Convention under the Jacobins abolishes slavery and grants equal rights to all black men Years of constant warfare (Whites supported by England vs. French supported by *gens de couleur* and slaves) French, with help from Toussaint L'Ouverture, finally defeats British in 1798. Revolution and war for independence now led by Toussaint L'Ouverture L'Ouverture overcomes his rivals to rule St. Domingue autonomously
- 1800 L'Ouverture rules supreme in St. Domingue; he tries to rebuild the colony and repair its shattered economy by restoring the plantation system. Ex-slaves are obligated to work on the plantations in return of the produce
- 1801 L'Ouverture issues a constitution for the island and named himself governor for life; he also annexed Santo Domingo, a French territory, and abolished slavery there as well Napoleon, angered by L'Ouverture's actions, invades. French lose 40,000 men to wounds and yellow fever.
- 1803-04 L'Ouverture captured, deported, and died in a French prison in 1803. Leadership falls to Jean Jacques Dessalines. When Napoleon tries to reinstitute slavery, the island erupts in revolt. French wage a war of genocide against the black population but to no avail. Napoleon eventually admits defeat and turns attention to fighting the British. Haiti gains its independence in 1804.