

The Haitian Revolution

The Haitian Revolution was a social and political upheaval in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (which shared the island of Hispaniola with the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo) during the period from 1791 to 1804. In 1791, slaves and *gens de couleur libres* (“free people of color”) rebelled against French rule, and in 1804 declared their country’s independence under the original Arawak name of Haiti.

The Haitian Revolution was, along with the American Revolution, one of the most significant and dramatic challenges to European colonialism in the New World, and historians widely regard it as a milestone in the history of Africans in the Americas. The Haitian Revolution is, in fact, the only successful large-scale slave insurrection in history, and it is often seen as initiating the decline of the slave trade.

Causes of the Haitian Revolution

The colonial economy was export driven, dominated by agriculture and trade. Saint-Domingue, with its tropical climate, was developed as a coffee- and sugar-producing colony, and sustained many large and profitable plantations. By the second half of the 18th century, sugar and coffee were two of the world’s most traded commodities, and Saint-Domingue produced over 60 percent of the world’s coffee and 40 percent of the world’s sugar. This made Saint-Domingue France’s most profitable plantation colony. To meet the growing needs of this plantation system, Saint-Domingue’s colonists continuously expanded the number of slaves. Thus, the colonial economy fueled the social imbalance that led to the revolution.

Colonial society, a racist society, was at fault, in part through its own rigidity. Social stratification was based on inherited position rather than personal merits. At the top there were the white colonists, or *blancs*, who owned most of the property. Below them were *gens de couleur libres* (which included light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks). Although they were often members of a free and educated propertied class, the system blocked them from occupying many public offices. The bottom layer of colonial society consisted of slaves, who were people of sub-Saharan African origin and/or descent (and also included light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks). (The issue of race was very complex in Haiti at this time. For a more in depth discussion, see the readings in subunit 3.3 of HIST221.) The slaves endured many forms of abuse at the hands of their masters and overseers. This legally authorized violence exacerbated slaves’ poor living conditions, resulting in a high mortality rate, which meant that a continuous supply of slaves was necessary. By the second half of the 18th century, the number of African slaves in Haiti had reached almost half a million, outnumbering the white colonists by a ratio of ten to one.

In the years preceding the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution, there were numerous slave insurrections. Many of these conflicts were initiated by the growing number of fugitive slaves, commonly known as Maroons. Runaways often hid in swamps and

woods and plundered nearby plantations. By the second half of the 18th century, Maroons began creating unified bands and initiating large-scale attacks; the Maroon uprisings led by François Mackandal, from 1751 through 1757, exemplify their newfound power in numbers.

The French Revolution was another important factor that shaped the Haitian Revolution. The French Revolution, along with the American Revolution, set precedents for overthrowing an old regime. In fact, the French Revolution had a deep effect on the philosophical underpinnings of Haitian society. One aspect that was drastically changed by the ideas of the French Revolution was the role of gens de couleur libres. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, of 1789, led several mixed-race leaders, including Vincent Ogé, Henri Grégoire, and Julien Raimond, to petition the French National Constituent Assembly for equal rights. On May 15, 1791, the National Constituent Assembly declared that the gens de couleur libres had the right to vote. Though it did not apply to slaves, the white colonists' resistance to this new law was cited by the insurgents as one of the causes of the 1791 slave revolt that eventually became the Haitian Revolution.

The Revolt of 1791

The denial of their newly granted privileges by the white colonists led the gens de couleur libres to attempt several successive revolts, including a bloody and failed rebellion led by Vincent Ogé in October of 1790. Ironically, the violence the slave owners used to put down these small revolts – and to try to keep their slaves in line – only added fuel to the fire, and ultimately led to a general insurrection and the slave owners' downfall.

On the night of August 14, 1791, a slave rebellion broke out. The catalyst may have been a religious ceremony performed at Bois Caïman by the Maroon voodoo priest Dutty Boukman, which was attended by representative slaves from several plantations. According to contemporary accounts, Boukman exhorted attendees to revolt against the white colonists. Within a few days, the gens de couleur libres, Maroons, and slaves had joined in a general insurrection against their French oppressors. The rebels' first target was to take control of the North, the area with the smallest concentration of French troops. As the rebellion spread over the next few days, numerous plantations were burned and over a thousand whites were slain.

The rebellion spread like wildfire. By September 1791, the rebels had been able to seize the capital, Port-au-Prince, and burn the city of Le Cap to the ground. Trying to restore order in the colony, France decided to grant amnesty to all gens de couleur libres, but not to the slaves. This measure did not have the desired effect – in fact, it led to more slaves joining the revolt. By March, France decided to dispatch 6,000 soldiers to the island.

The rebellion had exposed France's weakness, and two other European powers, Spain and Great Britain (which had troops in Jamaica), began skirmishing for a chance to control this profitable colony. While most of the white colonists allied with Great Britain, hoping to gain further independence from France (while maintaining their colonial society), the gens de couleur libres and slaves looked to Spain for further civil and political rights. On February 1, 1793, France declared war on Great Britain. Shortly thereafter, Spain dispatched troops to Saint-Domingue to join the rebels. Fearing a full-scale war, France's National Assembly passed an order that declared freedom for all slaves who joined the republic's army. In August, the French authorities on the island issued a general emancipation decree abolishing slavery, which was confirmed by the French government on February 4, 1794.

The general emancipation decree had the desired results: it prevented further clashes, and drew many of the leaders of the gens de couleur libres to the French side, including rising leader François-Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture. L'Ouverture, a former slave, had joined the rebellion in 1791 in hope of bringing slavery to an end. His military career as a leader of the Haitian Revolution began when he led several negotiations between the rebels and Spain for military supplies. In 1792, L'Ouverture was in charge of a small military unit, but due to his charisma and military acumen, by 1794 he was in command of the largest division of the rebel army, with over 5,000 troops.

Under the military leadership of L'Ouverture, soldiers were deployed to restore peace and stability. L'Ouverture was able to restore French control over Saint-Domingue, but now he was in charge of the autonomous government of the colony. The general emancipation and L'Ouverture's actions had forced a fatal wedge between the white colonists and France. In response, white colonists invited a British force to invade Saint-Domingue; however, they were repelled by an army of gens de couleur libres and slaves led by L'Ouverture in September 1798. In 1799, a small civil war known as the War of Knives (*Guerre des Couteaux*) broke out in Saint-Domingue. The opponents were L'Ouverture and André Rigaud, another revolutionary leader who had refused to accept L'Ouverture's rule over Saint-Domingue. This conflict was in fact a major clash between dark-skinned and light-skinned blacks for control of the colony. L'Ouverture was dark-skinned, André Rigaud was light-skinned, and each was supported by his own group. This power struggle ended when L'Ouverture ultimately defeated Rigaud in June 1799.

Although he was supposedly still part of the French army at this point, L'Ouverture was now the undisputed leader of Saint-Domingue, and he was determined to end slavery throughout the island of Hispaniola. In December 1800, he invaded Santo Domingo (modern-day Dominican Republic), declaring all slaves free on the island in January 1801. Under a de facto military dictatorship, L'Ouverture brought numerous social reforms to the island. In July 1801, he passed a constitution for Saint-Domingue based on the principles and ideas of the French Revolution. The 1801 constitution declared Saint-Domingue's autonomy, though it ratified its status as a French colony.

Napoleon Bonaparte's Response

In France, Napoleon Bonaparte, an ambitious military leader, seized power. After bringing peace to a war-torn France, Napoleon signed the Treaty of Amiens in March 1802, which ended the hostilities between France and Great Britain (though it would prove to be a short-lived peace). Napoleon made reestablishing France's control over its colonial possessions a priority, and sent his brother-in-law, Charles Leclerc, with 20,000 men to Hispaniola.

Even though L'Ouverture and his men managed to resist Leclerc's army, he faced a major setback when some of his generals joined Leclerc. Finally, in May 1802, L'Ouverture surrendered his men after negotiating an amnesty. However, the peace was uneasy and short-lived. By the Law of 20 May 1802, Bonaparte reestablished slavery in France's colonies of Martinique, Tobago, and Sainte-Lucie. Even though Napoleon declared that slavery was not to be reinstated in Saint-Domingue, the newly emancipated slaves revolted (Napoleon had made the same promise to the slaves of Martinique, only to go back on his word just a few weeks later).

The insurrection gained momentum after Leclerc and most of his men died of yellow fever. Napoleon appointed the Vicomte de Rochambeau, a veteran of the American Revolutionary War, as the head of the French army in Saint-Domingue. Historians credit his brutality and systematic attempts to quell dissent for finally uniting the different rebel factions against France. The French army under the command of General Donatien de Rochambeau and the rebel forces led by Jean-Jacques Dessalines faced each other in the Battle of Vertières, on November 18, 1803. With the resounding victory of the rebels, the Battle of Vertières became the last battle of the Haitian Revolution.

Faced with bankruptcy and a new war against Britain, Napoleon decided not to dispatch any more forces to Saint-Domingue. In fact, Napoleon was no longer able to deal with France's overseas possessions, as is shown by the sale of the Louisiana Territory to the United States in 1803.

Independence

The end of colonialism had come at a high price: over a quarter of a million rebels and thousands of Europeans had lost their lives. On January 1, 1804, Dessalines proclaimed the independent Republic of Haiti. After nearly three centuries, slavery was finally abolished on the island. But still, since the previous system of administration was more or less maintained, social inequality remained in the new republic. The gens de couleur libres, who researchers later called *affranchi*, replaced the slave owners at the top of the social hierarchy. Nonetheless, Haitian society began to undergo a fundamental transformation in self-identity, and the principle of equality would play a significant role in the process.

The war had economic as well as political and social consequences. The revolutionary war had ruined Haiti's economy and driven the country into massive debt. The devastation of war had reduced the productive capacity of its agriculture, which put a further strain on the commerce of the country. The situation only worsened in 1825, when President Jean Pierre Boyer negotiated an indemnity treaty which stipulated that, in exchange for France's acknowledgement of Haiti's independence, Haiti would pay French colonists several million francs to compensate them for their lost property. As a result, there was no international confidence in the new republic, and most lenders refused credit. Capital had emigrated with its European possessors. The treasury was empty, as no contributions could be collected from an impoverished population, and the island's future was compromised even further by loans at usurious rates.

Legacy

The Haitian Revolution was a unique event that produced deep changes and had a profound effect on world affairs. It led to the creation of the first postcolonial sovereign state in Latin America. It challenged the old colonial European order, and became an example of a successful revolution against a European empire.

Historians widely regard the Haitian Revolution as one of the most important events in the history of Africans in the New World. In fact, the decline of the Atlantic slave trade is traditionally attributed to the onset of the Haitian Revolution in 1791. Haiti also had the honor of being the first postcolonial black-led nation in the world. Although it failed to spur immediate slave revolts in the Caribbean and ultimately the world, it had a profound impact as an example for many other national liberation movements.