

HAITI'S SLAVE REVOLT AND WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE

Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines played key roles in modern history's only successful slave revolt. What became known as the Haitian Revolution led to the founding of an independent nation now called Haiti.

The large Caribbean island of Hispaniola, located between Cuba and Puerto Rico, was the island where Christopher Columbus landed in 1492, claiming it for Spain. In 1697, Spain gave up the western side to France, which took that portion as its colony of Saint-Domingue. The eastern side remained the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo.

During the 1700s, Saint-Domingue emerged as the world's biggest producer of sugar. The sugar plantations required large numbers of laborers. The native Taino people were soon wiped out by slavery, massacres, and European diseases. French colonists then replaced them with African slaves.

The port city of Cap-Francais, usually called Cap (Cape), became the French colony's capital. Through this city most slaves were imported, and sugar was exported. By the late 1700s, Saint-Domingue was France's richest colony.

Saint-Domingue's social structure was shaped by the institution of slavery. At the top were the white French planters. They owned the large sugar plantations and most of the enslaved people who worked the land. Next were whites who were plantation overseers, skilled workers, merchants, and soldiers. Some of them owned small coffee farms and a small number of slaves.

Unlike how slavery was practiced in the United States, in Saint-Domingue white slaveholding men often emancipated (freed) the mixed-race children they



Toussaint Louverture, French general and leader of the Haitian Revolution.

fathered with enslaved black women. Planters sometimes emancipated adult slaves, too. Once freed, these "free people of color" could have some of the same privileges as free whites, including getting an education and even becoming prosperous in business and trades. But they did not have all the rights of full French citizens. Some became coffee growers and, once free, owned slaves themselves.

By 1790, there were a half million slaves laboring on Saint-Domingue's sugar plantations. Their numbers overwhelmed the white colonists 10-to-1. Up to 10% of plantation slaves died each year due to overwork, hunger, brutal treatment, and disease. The French King Louis XIV ordered a code to protect slaves from mistreatment, but the planters largely ignored it.

The Revolution Begins

Uprisings in several French Caribbean colonies, but not Saint-Domingue, were inspired by the American and French revolutions between 1776 and 1789. However, the revolutionaries in those other colonies were whites seeking self-rule and free people of color demanding an end to laws that discriminated against them. Slaves did not participate in these revolts. France easily put them down.

In August 1791, a massive, well-planned slave revolt erupted throughout Saint-Domingue. Rebels destroyed hundreds of sugar and coffee plantations and killed many French planters and their families. By September, 20,000 rebels had won numerous battles against French troops. The Haitian Revolution had begun.

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Louverture: From Slave to Revolutionary

Toussaint Louverture was born around 1743 to West African slave parents on the Breda family plantation near Cap. His father was soon sold to another slaveholder.

The Bredas were Roman Catholics, so Toussaint grew up a devout Christian. His mother named him Toussaint, meaning All Saints Day. He received some education in the French language and culture from his godfather, a free person of color who worked on the Breda plantation.

At about 18, Toussaint was given permission to informally marry Cecile who was also a Breda slave. Fifteen years later in 1776, he was emancipated in circumstances that are not clear. One of his first acts was to buy Cecile's freedom.

Toussaint saved money from being a carriage driver for the Breda family and bought a small coffee farm worked by a dozen slaves that he leased. But this enterprise failed, and his marriage and family split apart. He returned to the Breda plantation as a manager of mules that transported sugar cane to the refinery that he helped run.

By 1785, Toussaint had married again, this time in the Catholic Church. Suzanne Baptiste was another Breda slave and probably the daughter of his godfather. As with Cecile before, he paid for Suzanne to be free.

When the slave revolt began on Saint-Domingue in 1791, Toussaint was in his late 40s and not at first involved. Soon, however, he joined the rebellion and demonstrated outstanding military and political skills. These skills and his ability to speak French gave him a key role in attempts to negotiate an end to the fighting. Toussaint proposed banning the use of the whip and adding an additional non-work day. But the planters rejected this, and the revolt continued.

Recognized as a key revolutionary leader, Toussaint became committed to ending slavery. He adopted the

last name “Louverture,” from a French concept, meaning “the one who opened the way.”

France Abolishes Slavery

While the slave revolt on Saint-Domingue was going on, revolution in France overthrew the king and replaced him with a republic. Despite its soaring words about all men being born “free and equal,” the new revolutionary government sent troops to crush the slave revolt on Saint-Domingue.

Spain, long an enemy of France, supported the Saint-Domingue rebellion from the neighboring colony of Santo Domingo. Louverture and other rebels crossed over into Santo Domingo and joined the Spanish army, which then invaded Saint-Domingue to fight the French. At the same time, Britain also invaded in an attempt to grab the sugar-rich colony.

But things changed quickly. In 1793, Leger Sonthonax, sent by France to end the slave revolt, changed sides. He and the other French generals proclaimed the emancipation of all Saint-Domingue slaves to draw them into the fight against Spain and Britain. Louverture and the other rebel leaders changed their loyalty back to France and joined the French army.

The French government confirmed the emancipation of slaves in Saint-Domingue in 1794. Then, in 1799, it declared the abolition of slavery throughout the French empire. Suddenly, freed slaves became French citizens. France became the first major power to abolish slavery. However, the free people of color did not immediately gain full citizenship rights, which caused discontent among them.

‘The Black Napoleon’

Louverture and his former-slave soldiers took the lead in successfully winning battles against the Spanish and

British. Spain finally withdrew in 1795 and gave up Santo Domingo to France. Britain left Saint-Domingue a few years later after yellow fever killed many British troops.

France promoted Louverture to a general in the French army and then lieutenant governor of Saint-Domingue. He fought a bloody civil war against a rival mixed-race general. The war ended only after Louverture ordered massacres of many of his rival's mixed-race supporters. After the elimination of his rival, Louverture was the de facto ruler of Saint-Domingue.

Louverture began to establish relations with other countries, including the United States. The U.S. had long traded with Saint-Domingue. And U.S. warships blockaded the ports controlled by Louverture's rival during the Saint-Domingue civil war.

In 1799, the U.S. responded to French interference with its trade by placing an embargo (ban) on Americans trading with France and its colonies. But Louverture managed to get President John Adams and supporters in Congress to make an exception to allow the continuation of American trade with Saint-Domingue.

Louverture wanted to restore Saint-Domingue's profitable sugar plantation system. He required the former slaves to return to the sugar and coffee plantations and take pay in the form of a portion of what they produced. However, the former slaves, whom Louverture called "cultivators," were not happy with his plan. Many wanted their own plots of land to farm. Louverture used his army to put down a revolt in 1801, killing thousands of cultivators.

Louverture hand-picked an assembly to draft a constitution for the colony. The Constitution of 1801 forever abolished slavery: "All men who are born here live and die free and French." The Constitution entrusted Louverture with the control of the colony's government "for the remainder of his glorious life." The Constitution also granted him the authority to name his successor.

The Constitution upheld Louverture's cultivator system and granted him important powers that put Saint-Domingue under one-man rule. He became known at this time as the "Black Napoleon," named after Napoleon Bonaparte who had recently seized power in France.

Napoleon Invades Saint-Domingue

Back in France, Napoleon was enraged by Louverture's constitution that seemed to be almost a declaration of independence. Early in 1802, Napoleon sent a massive expedition consisting of 43,000 soldiers



Jean-Jacques Dessalines, leader of the Haitian Revolution after Louverture and first ruler of an independent Haiti.

and two-thirds of his navy to Saint-Domingue under the command of his brother-in-law Victoire Leclerc to restore French authority. When they landed near Cap, Louverture ordered the city burned. He declared, "We must die or live free."

To recruit fighters to his army, Louverture used the fear of Napoleon bringing back slavery to Saint-Domingue. But many who hated Louverture's cultivator policies refused to join. Napoleon's professional army defeated Louverture in a number of battles, driving him into the mountains. He resorted to guerilla warfare tactics.

However, in May of 1802, Louverture negotiated a cease-fire. Shortly afterward, Leclerc arrested

him and sent him in chains to France where he was imprisoned. Louverture warned, "In overthrowing me you have cut down in Saint-Domingue only the trunk of the tree of liberty; it will spring up again from the roots, for they are numerous and they are deep."

The War for Independence

To prevent any further uprisings, Leclerc ordered a policy of disarming all former slaves. Fighting resumed when many black people feared this was the first step toward the return of the slave plantation system.

Yellow fever hit Napoleon's troops hard in the spring and summer of 1802. This tropical disease was introduced to the New World by the slave ships from Africa. Although the slaves were not immune, they were much more resistant to this disease than the French and other whites.

As yellow fever weakened the French forces, rebel fighters drove them and civilians into the cities where they sought protection. But the overcrowding only spread the disease faster. No one knew that yellow fever was caused by a virus spread by mosquitoes and that it was contagious among humans. During the epidemic, nearly half the French troops who arrived with Leclerc died of the disease. Many others were too sick to fight.

Leclerc then called for a war of extermination of all rebels. He ordered mass executions of thousands of rebel prisoners and any civilians, even women and children, who were suspected of aiding them. Firing squads and hangings were soon replaced by forcing thousands of captured rebels, civilians, and their families onto ships to be dumped into the sea to drown.

Jean-Jacques Dessalines, an African-born slave, was one of Louverture's top generals who joined the French army after the cease-fire. At first, he fought with the French against the rebels. But he finally defected when he

could no longer tolerate Leclerc's brutality and the French army's atrocities, as did other generals and soldiers.

Dessalines soon became the chief rebel general, unifying black and mixed-race fighters into a well-trained army. "Unity makes strength," he said.

Leclerc died of yellow fever in November 1802. He was replaced by Donatien Rochambeau, who led a brief successful offensive against the rebels and added to Leclerc's atrocities by ordering burnings at the stake and crucifixions. But he is best remembered for introducing hundreds of large war dogs that ended up being frightened by gunfire and sometimes attacked French soldiers.

By the summer of 1803, independence had become the official goal of the rebels who now included large numbers of black people, mixed-race people, and even some whites. As more black and mixed-race officers and soldiers defected from the French army, Rochambeau withdrew most of his forces to defend Cap, the capital of the colony.

Dessalines besieged Cap and finally forced Rochambeau to surrender on November 18, 1803. Rochambeau and the surviving French troops were permitted to sail out of Cap's harbor amid jeers from crowds who yelled, "Go to the sea and drown!"

In the meantime, Napoleon was at war with Britain and had decided to abandon his plans for an American empire. He never sent troops back to Saint-Domingue, and he sold French Louisiana to the U.S. in 1803.

From the first slave revolt in 1791 until independence was won in 1803, about half the entire population of Saint-Domingue had been killed. Back in a castle dungeon in France, Louverture died alone at age 57, separated from his family, on April 7, 1803.

Haitian Independence

On January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared the independence of Saint-Domingue. His declaration focused on the cruelties of the French, "these tigers still dripping with their [victims'] blood."

Dessalines renamed the colony Haiti, which means "mountainous land" in the native Taino language. Haiti became the second independent nation in the Americas after the United States.

One of Dessalines's first acts after independence was to order the massacres of up to 5,000 French men who had remained in Haiti. He justified this as revenge for French slavery and atrocities.

In 1805, Dessalines produced a new constitution that kept Louverture's cultivator system and one-man rule in place. After proclaiming himself Emperor Jacques I, Dessalines was assassinated by military officers in 1806. Haiti's cultivator system collapsed when Haitians refused to work on the sugar plantations, Haiti's chief source of income.

Troubles Since Independence

In 1825, France finally recognized the independence of Haiti, but only after Haiti agreed to compensate the French planters for their loss of land. For the next 120 years, 80% of Haiti's revenues went toward paying these reparations to France, stunting Haiti's economy, education system, and democratic development.

The United States did not recognize Haiti's independence until 1862. In that same year, American lawyer William Whiting wrote a book that used the example of the emancipation of slaves in Saint-Domingue almost 70 years before to make the case for a presidential power to emancipate Southern slaves during the American Civil War. Abraham Lincoln read this book before deciding to issue the Emancipation Proclamation the following year.

In the 20th century, while Haiti was still trying to pay off the enormous debt to France, U.S. Marines occupied the country from 1915-1934 to control its finances and protect American businesses. Fifteen thousand Haitian resisters to occupation were killed during those years.

Lack of economic development, poverty, political instability, military dictators, civil war, hurricanes, and earthquakes have made Haiti the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. This is a troubled legacy for the land of Louverture, who had defeated the early modern world's great empires of France, Britain, and Spain.

WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. Describe the influence of the Haitian Revolution from 1791 - 1804 both in Haiti and beyond.
2. What do you think was the biggest mistake made by the French during Haiti's war for independence? Why?
3. Today, Jean-Jacques Dessalines rather than Toussaint Louverture is the revolutionary hero most celebrated by the Haitian people. Why do you think this is?

ACTIVITY: Reparations for Haitian Descendants of Slaves

Two-hundred years after securing independence, Haiti presented France with a bill for over \$21 billion for reparations (compensation) for the suffering caused by slavery. In 2014, Haiti and other former French colonies in the Caribbean issued demands for reparations that included programs to improve the literacy and health of the descendants of slaves.

In small groups, discuss whether Haiti should get reparations from France for slavery on Saint-Domingue. If so, what form should the reparations take: payments to individual slave descendants, college scholarships, free health care, job training, economic development, or other compensation? Each group should be ready to have a spokesperson share their group's recommendations with the class.

Standards Addressed

Haiti's Slave Revolt and War for Independence

California History-Social Science Standard 10.4: Students analyze patterns of change in the era of New Imperialism in at least two of the following regions or countries: Africa, Southeast Asia, China, India, Latin America, and the Philippines. (2) Discuss the locations of colonial rule of such nations as England, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Russia, Spain, Portugal, and the United States. (3) Explain imperialism from the perspective of the colonizers and the colonized and the varied immediate and long-term responses by the people under colonial rule. (4) Describe the independence struggles of the colonial regions of the world, including the roles of leaders. . . .

National World History Standard 29: Understands the economic, political, and cultural interrelations among peoples of Africa, Europe, and the Americas between 1500 and 1750. High School: (4) Understands characteristics of the development of European colonies in the Americas (e.g., the appeal of the Americas for European colonists in the 16th and 17th centuries). (8) Understands how slavery was defined by different groups of people (e.g., key differences between the understanding of "slavery" by Africans and by European settlers in the Americas; how slavery was practiced . . . in early modern times. (9) Understands how the African slave trade influenced the lives of slaves in the Western Hemisphere (e.g., the institutions, beliefs, and practices of slaves working on plantations in the Western Hemisphere; the history of open slave rebellion and resistance in the Western Hemisphere. . . .).

National World History Standard 32: Understands the causes and consequences of political revolutions in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. High School: (1) Understands the impact of the Haitian Revolution (e.g., connections between the French and Haitian Revolutions, the impact of this event on race relations and slavery in the Americas and the French Empire). (2) Understands comparisons between the Latin American revolutions and those in America, France, and Haiti (e.g., pre-independence social and political conditions, opposed regimes/policies, justifications of the revolutions, class representation, extent of revolution)

Common Core State Standards: SL.9-10.1, SL.9-10.3, RH 9-10.1, RH.9-10.3, RH.9-10.10, WHST.11-12.10.

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Sources

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