The Haitian Revolution (1791 – 1804)

The Haitian Revolution has often been described as the largest and most successful slave rebellion in the Western Hemisphere. Slaves initiated the rebellion in 1791 and by 1803 they had succeeded in ending not just slavery but French control over the colony. The revolution was influenced by the French Revolution of 1789, which would come to represent a new concept of human rights, universal citizenship, and participation in government.

In the 18th century, Saint Dominigue, as Haiti was then known, was France's wealthiest overseas colony, largely because of its production of sugar, coffee, indigo, and cotton generated by an enslaved labor force. This colony was crucial to the French economy, and the economy functioned on the importation of thousands of slaves per year. When the French Revolution broke out in 1789 there were four distinct social groups in the colony. There were European born white planters (grande blancs) -- who owned the plantations and the slaves -- and petit blancs, who were white artisans, shop keepers and teachers. Some of them also owned a few slaves. Together they numbered 40,000 of the colony’s residents. Many of the whites on Saint Dominigue began to support independence when France imposed steep taxes on the items imported into the colony. Also, the plantation owners were extremely disenchanted with France because they were forbidden to trade with any other nation. Furthermore, the white population of Saint-Domingue did not have any political representation in France. Despite their calls for independence, both the planters and petit blancs remained committed to the institution of slavery. The remaining groups were of African descent, those who were free, those who were slaves, and those who had run away. There were about 30,000 free black people in 1789 and often they were wealthier than the petit blancs. The slave population was close to 500,000 including some runaway slaves (called maroons) who had retreated deep into the mountains of the island and lived off subsistence farming. Slavery in Haiti was particularly brutal, due to the harshness and dangers of harvesting sugar cane, and also due to the often cruel treatment of slaves by slave owners. The average life expectancy of a slave in Saint Domingue was only a few years.

The first act of revolution would be by the slaves, led by general and former slave Toussaint L’Overture. In August, 1791, the slaves in Saint Domingue revolted on a mass scale against the plantation owners. They were inspired by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and used the slogan: ”Listen to the voice of liberty that lives in the hearts of all.” In a rush of violence, they burned many plantations to the ground and killed several slave owners. Back in France, the National Assembly, having just executed the King, had their own revolution to worry about. To restore authority over the slaves, the deputies of the revolution in Paris granted civil and political rights to the free blacks. This action infuriated white planters and merchants who felt betrayed by the French Revolutionary government. These planters and
merchants decided in 1793 that their best choice was to sign an agreement with Great Britain – France’s largest enemy in war. To complicate matters further, Spain, which controlled the rest of the island and had entered on Great Britain’s side in the war with France, offered freedom to individual slave rebels who joined the Spanish armies as long as they agreed to maintain the slave regime for the other blacks.

The French troops on Saint Domingue were outnumbered, and to prevent complete military disaster, the French commissioner freed all the slaves in his jurisdiction in August 1793 and in 1794 the National Convention formally abolished slavery. The former slaves managed to stave off both the French forces and the British and by 1801 L’Overture expanded the revolution beyond Haiti, conquering the neighboring Spanish colony of Santo Domingo (present-day Dominican Republic). He abolished slavery in the Spanish-speaking colony and declared himself Governor-General for life over the entire island of Hispaniola.

At that same moment in Europe, Napoleon Bonaparte, now the ruler of France, dispatched General Charles Leclerc, his brother-in-law, and 40,000 French troops to capture L’Overture and restore both French rule and slavery. L’Overture was captured and sent to France where he died in prison in 1803. Nonetheless, the former slaves who were now led by Jean-Jacques Dessalines, one of L’Overture’s generals and himself a former slave, won a decisive victory at the Battle of Vertieres on November 18, 1803. On January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared the nation independent from France and renamed it Haiti.

Haiti thus emerged as the first black lead republic in the world, and the second nation in the western hemisphere (after the United States) to win its independence from a European power. Unfortunately, the country was crippled financially at its independence by the years of war, its agriculture devastated and its overseas trade nonexistent. Furthermore, Haiti was later forced to make reparations to French slaveholders in 1825 in the amount of 150 million francs in exchange for French recognition of its independence and to achieve freedom from French aggression. This bankrupted the new Haitian government treasury and affected Haiti’s ability to be prosperous for decades. Haiti was ruled by a succession of military dictators into the 20th Century and remains the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.