

Toussaint L'Ouverture & The Haitian Revolution

the haitian revolution

At one point in time, the island of Haiti was jointly owned by Spain and France, each claiming one half of the island as its colony. The climate there proved ideal for the growing of sugar cane, and soon the French & Spanish established large plantations. Originally, they utilized the forced labor of the natives. But these native peoples were soon wiped out by the strange and new diseases brought by the French and Spanish. Thus, African slaves were imported to do the labor instead

The year is 1791. The United States is in its first years as the first republic in the western hemisphere. Europe is in disarray as the French Revolution burns across the face of France. 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. 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 most cruel 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.

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 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.



**Toussaint
L'Ouverture**

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 Toussaint L'Ouverture. This man, whom many 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.

He didn't participate in the burning of the plantations or the executions of the slaveowners. 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 whom 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.

With peace now established and the entire island now under control, though only for a brief time, Toussaint began implementing social reforms and improving the country's infrastructure.

Toussaint constructed roads, repaired forts, enhanced agriculture, restructured the country's armed forces, built schools for the black children, and declared free trade throughout the country. However, in an effort to keep Haiti economically stable and prosperous, Toussaint invited the former plantation owners to return to the country and ensured them that the blacks would again work for them, but only for payment. Yet this was not satisfactory to the Africans and soon his people rose up against him, led by his own nephew. After he finished subduing this outburst, the island's mulatto population (those of mixed blood) revolted under General Rigaud. Toussaint then turned to the United States for assistance, promising President John Adams that if the US would support him against the mulattoes, he would deny France the use of Haiti as a platform for maneuvers in North America. With the aid of American forces, the insurrection was soon defeated, and in 1800, Rigaud and his remaining men fled the country.

Toussaint by all accounts was a brilliant and charismatic statesman and leader. Although Haiti was 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. 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. Leclerc, under Napoleon's orders, later invited Toussaint to a meeting where, despite Leclerc's promise of safe conduct, the general had him captured, bound hand and foot, and put aboard a waiting ship. Toussaint was then transported to France and thrown into the dungeon of Fort de Joux in the Jura Mountains. And on April 7, 1803, Toussaint L'Ouverture died of apoplexy, pneumonia, and starvation.

Dessalines With the death of Toussaint, the revolution was carried on by Jean-Jacques Dessalines. 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 equalled 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.

By 1803 war had resumed between France and Britain, and Bonaparte once again concentrated his energies on the struggle in Europe. In April of that year, Bonaparte signed a treaty that allowed the purchase of Louisiana by the United States and ended French ambitions in the Western Hemisphere. Rochambeau's reinforcements and supplies never arrived. The general fled to Jamaica in November 1803, where he surrendered to British authorities rather than face the retribution of the rebel leadership. The era of French colonial rule in Haiti had ended.

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.