

Haitian Revolution

The **Haitian Revolution** was the most successful of the many African [slave rebellions](#) in the Western Hemisphere and established [Haïti](#) as a free, black [republic](#), the first of its kind. Africans and people of African ancestry freed themselves from slavery and colonization by taking advantage of the conflict among whites over how to implement the reforms of the French Revolution in this slave society. Historians traditionally identify the catalyst as being a particular [voodoo](#) service in August 1791 performed at [Bois Caïman](#) by [Dutty Boukman](#), a high priest. A number of complex events may have set the stage for the most significant revolt in the history of African enslavement.

At the time, Haïti was a colony of [France](#) known as [Saint-Domingue](#). After two years of dispute among elements of the free population, in 1791 a great slave uprising plunged the country into civil war. Besides the racial conflicts cultivated by slavemasters between whites, [gens de couleur](#) (people of mixed African and French descent), and blacks (many of them slaves of [African](#) birth), the country was polarized by regional rivalries between the [North](#), [South](#), and [West](#); class conflict between rich white planters (*grands blancs*), poorer whites (*petits blancs*), free blacks or [gens de couleur](#) (*affranchis*), and slaves; and conflict between proponents of independence, those loyal to [France](#), allies of [Spain](#), and allies of [Britain](#). Closely shaping the course of the conflict was the [French Revolution](#) which began in 1789, and was at first widely welcomed in the island. So many were the twists and turns in the leadership in France, and so contorted were events in Haïti itself, that various classes and parties changed their alignments many times.

The African population got wind of the agitation for independence by the rich European planters, the *grands blancs*, who had resented France's mercantilistic limitations on the island's foreign trade. This class mostly realigned itself with the royalists and the British within a few years of the French Revolution. Africans understood that if 'Saint-Domingue's' independence was to be led by vile and brutal European slavemasters, it would probably mean even harsher treatment and injustices for the African population, who would be free to inflict slavery as they pleased - without being accountable to their French peers whatsoever. News had probably travelled from the newly independent United States that revolution by whites there had not abolished slavery or improved the lives of slaves in any way.

Saint-Domingue's [free people of color](#), most notably [Julien Raimond](#), had been actively appealing to France for full civil equality with whites since the 1780s. Raimond used the French Revolution to make this the major colonial issue before the French National Assembly. In October 1790, [Vincent Ogé](#), another wealthy free man of color from the colony, returned home from Paris where he had been working with Raimond. Convinced that an ambiguous law passed by the French [Constituent Assembly](#) had given full civil rights to wealthy men of color like himself, Ogé demanded the right to vote. When the colonial governor refused, he led a brief insurgency in the area around [Cap Français](#), before being captured and brutally executed in early 1791. Ogé was not fighting against slavery, as such, but his treatment was cited by later slave rebels as one of the influences on their decision to rise up in August 1791 in the same parishes, and to resist treaties with the colonists. At length, in [1792](#), the French legislature proclaimed the equality of all free people in the French colonies regardless of color, and sent [Léger-Félicité Sonthonax](#) to Saint-Domingue ensure that the colonial authorities complied.

However, even larger disturbances were underway, as the slave uprising begun in August 1791 and led by [Jean François](#) and [Biassou](#), associated itself with the pro-royalist [Spanish](#) authorities in [Santo Domingo](#). The [slave rebellion](#) began on the plantations in the north and spread across most of the colony. Slaves burnt the [plantations](#) where they had been forced to work, and killed masters, overseers and other whites. One of the most successful black commanders was [Toussaint L'Ouverture](#), a self-educated former domestic slave. A French general, [Étienne Laveaux](#), was able to convince him to change sides in May [1794](#) and fight for the French Republic against the Spanish; meanwhile Sonthonax proclaimed an end to slavery on 29 August [1793](#).



Under the military leadership of Toussaint, the rebellious slaves were able to gain the upper hand and restore

most of Saint-Domingue to France. Having made himself master of the island, however, Toussaint did not wish to surrender power to Paris, and ruled the country effectively as an autonomous entity. Toussaint overcame a succession of local rivals (including Sonthonax, [André Rigaud](#), and [Hédouville](#)), defeated the British expeditionary force in 1798, and even led an invasion of neighboring Santo Domingo, freeing the slaves there by [1801](#).

In this same year, Toussaint issued a constitution for Saint-Domingue which provided for autonomy and made Toussaint himself governor for life. In retaliation, [Napoleon Bonaparte](#) dispatched an expedition of French soldiers to the island, led by Bonaparte's brother in law [Charles Leclerc](#), to restore French rule. After being deceived by false guarantees, Toussaint was seized and shipped off to France where he died two years later while imprisoned at [Fort-de-Joux](#). For a few months the island was largely quiescent under Napoleonic rule, but in October of [1802](#), the Haïtian generals revolted under the leadership of [Jean-Jacques Dessalines](#) (one of L'Ouverture's generals and a fellow former slave). Leclerc had died of yellow fever, like much of his army, and his successor, the [Vicomte de Rochambeau](#) fought an even more brutal campaign than his predecessor. His atrocities helped rally many former French loyalists to the rebel cause. Dessalines led the rebellion until its completion when the French forces were finally defeated at the [Battle of Vertières](#) in 1803.

On [January 1, 1804](#), Dessalines declared Haïti a free republic and joined the [United States](#) as the second independent nation in the [Western Hemisphere](#). However Haiti was forced to make reparations to French slaveholders in 1825 in the amount of 90 million [gold francs](#) (a value of \$21 billion USD today), Haïti was forced to pay [France](#) for the next one hundred years for its independence. A great many historians believe that this indemnity has contributed significantly to making Haiti the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.

The end of the Haïtian Revolution in [1804](#) marked the end of colonialism, but the poison that had been cultivated in slavery continued to affect the population. The revolution left in power an [affranchi](#) élite and the formidable Haïtian army. These elements split into two factions – the supporters of [Alexandre Pétion](#) who were predominantly *milat* ([mulatto](#), light-skinned), and those of [Henri Christophe](#) who were mainly *nwa* (noir, dark-skinned). Both factions assumed control of most of the businesses in the new country.

Haïtian Revolution	
Date	August 22,1791—January 1,1804
Result	<i>Haïti wins independence from France</i>
Combatants	
Haïti	France
	
Manpower	
Haïti	France
Regular army: up to 55,000 Volunteers: up to 100,000	Regular army: 60,000 Naval and marine: 86 warships and frigates
Casualties	

<p><u>Haiti:</u></p> <p>Killed in action: Unknown, in the tens of thousands</p> <p>Wounded in action: unknown</p> <p>Executed: unknown</p> <p>Other deaths: enter</p> <p>Civilian deaths: up to 100,000</p>	<p><u>France</u></p> <p>5-6,000 dead, 15,000 wounded 10,000 died of yellow fever epidemic</p>
<p><u>Indigenous peoples:</u></p>	<p><u>Indigenous peoples:</u> approx. 25,000 white French settlers in 1791</p>
<p>*Volunteers were semi-professional troops</p> <p>**Most militia did not participate in fighting or campaigning</p>	