

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.3—Haitian Revolution

BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

Haiti was the French colony of St. Domingue (Santo Domingo), the most productive colonial economy in the world. Dominated by plantation agriculture, primarily to supply sugar and coffee to the world market, Haiti had a slave population of nearly 90 percent. African slaves were brought to the island in the Atlantic slave trade. The balance of the population consisted of peoples of European ancestry and of mixed heritage, defined in the law of the colony as “white” or *gens de couleur* (people of color), respectively. Both of these groups owned slaves. French administrators governed the island. By 1788, the native Indian population had died out completely as a result of the Spanish conquest, harsh labor policies, and introduction of infectious diseases from [Afroeurasia](#).

In no way were any of these racial groups united, except perhaps in opposition to each other. There were even divisions within the slave population, primarily between a larger group of agricultural laborers and a smaller group involved in domestic service and, in some cases, the management of the plantation system. The white population consisted of a planter elite known as *grands blancs* and a larger class of *petits blancs*, men and women who participated in the economy primarily as artisans or merchants in the cities. *Gens de couleur*, like whites, were divided by class, though the disparity of wealth was not as great as that between *grands* and *petits blancs*.

CAUSES

The root of the Haitian revolution was the fundamental imbalance in Haitian society. Slaves made up the vast majority of the population and were oppressed on a daily basis in the most naked ways and thoroughly deprived economically in a system that produced great wealth. For this slave population, the most pressing issue was the termination of slavery and the social inequality it entailed. As the colony was 90 percent slave, this issue was inevitably the focus of the revolution.

Political unrest in the colony began, however, with class tensions among the white population. As a French colony, St. Domingue did not receive representation in the Estates-General of 1789. The *grands blancs* sent representatives anyway. These people were ultimately admitted into the French National Assembly, but the vote was restricted to whites who owned twenty or more slaves. This policy kept out the *petits blancs*, and it held in elections for local assemblies. The *petits blancs*, arguing in a nationalist manner for their rights as Frenchmen, fought the *grands blancs* in a civil war between town and country. Both groups, however, based their political claims on their French heritage, the *grands blancs* arguing for liberty to represent the colony, the *petits blancs* demanding political equality with the *grands*. This left both the *gens de couleur* and the slaves out of the loop. After revolts by the *gens de couleur* led by Vincent Ogé resulted in a wave of racial oppression, the slave population leapt into the opening left by the political crisis, staging a coordinated rebellion in August 1791. By 1794, Toussaint L’Ouverture, a brilliant general and former slave, assumed leadership of the rebellion.

RESULTS

Haiti proclaimed its independence from France in 1804, as a republic. As all of the groups in the revolution except the slaves conceived of liberty and equality in terms of their own situation, none of them had supported the abolition of slavery. It was this, however, that the slave population demanded. The whites, both *grands* and *petits blancs*, wanted to hold on to white privilege. The rebels accordingly drove them off the island. The *gens de couleur* wanted to keep the right to own slaves. They were also driven off or deprived of their slave property, though some of them stayed and retained economic and social power.

The Haitian revolution abolished slavery on the island. It was the first major successful slave revolt in the Atlantic world, and L'Ouverture became known among the slave population of the Americas as a liberating hero. The Haitian revolution also gave strength to the anti-slavery movement among European peoples. In the following decades, abolitionists used the example of Haiti to convince slave owners that using free labor was, if nothing else, a good way to avoid a bloody uprising.

The newly-independent Haiti, however, faced two immediate economic problems. On the one hand, slave-owning societies, like the United States, placed an embargo on Haiti, fearing that its example would encourage other slave revolts. This embargo deprived Haiti of many of its former markets. On the other hand, the former slaves proved very unwilling to continue plantation labor, which they very sensibly associated with slavery. This led to continuing class tension among those who remained on the island and a rapid transition from democracy to dictatorship.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What groups of people lived in Haiti before the revolution?
2. How did the long-term and immediate causes of the Haitian revolution differ?
3. How did different groups of people in Haiti understand the Enlightenment ideas of liberty and equality?
4. What did the Haitian revolution accomplish, and what problems did the new country face following independence?
5. In what ways did the Haitian revolution produce freedom? What were the limits of this freedom?
6. In what ways did the Haitian revolution produce equality? What were the limits of this equality?