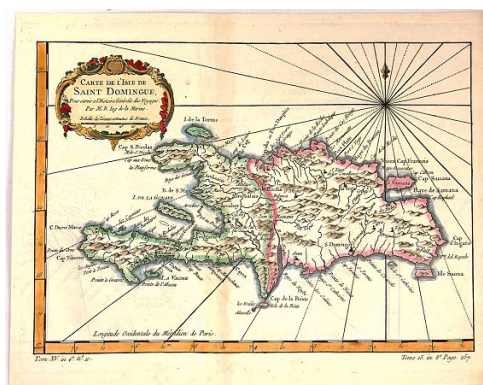


Haiti: How enslaved people founded their own nation

It is 1804. The French give up and leave the former French colony of Saint-Domingue. After the death of one of the most prominent figures of the revolution, Toussaint Louverture (a former enslaved man), Jean-Jacques Dessalines proclaims a new state: the Black Republic of Haiti. This event is known in history books as the only successful slave revolt in the written history of humankind—but how did it come to pass, and how has this republic managed to endure to the present day?

The origins and importance of Saint-Domingue

It is the 18th century, and European expansion is in full swing. European great powers such as Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and England search beyond the continent for raw materials and spices that are difficult or impossible to cultivate or find in Europe—primarily in the Indies and the New World (North and South America). France also took part in this European expansion and obtained the right to establish a colony on part of an island in the Caribbean Sea. The French named this part of the island Saint-Domingue and shared the island with the Spanish, who called their side Santo Domingo, which today is the Dominican Republic.



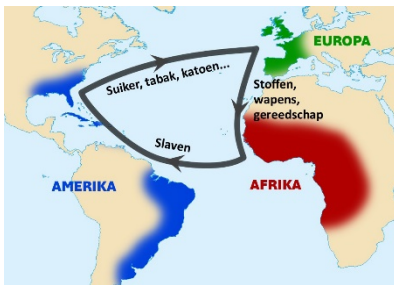
The old map of Saint-Domingue (green) and Santo Domingo (red). Source: Swaen.com, Creator: Jacques-Nicolas Bellin.

The main reason for colonizing the New World was the production of goods such as cacao and sugarcane. Due to the climate, these crops grew much more easily



in colonies like Saint-Domingue, generating enormous profits. It therefore did not take long before the French arrived to establish plantations.

At first, these plantations were worked by so-called Indians (the indigenous population of the New World). However, because many of them died in large numbers from diseases brought by Europeans, such as the plague, plantation owners were forced to look for enslaved people who were more resistant to these diseases. In this case, they turned to Africans. This set the Transatlantic Slave Trade in motion. Europeans acquired enslaved people in Africa, usually prisoners taken from rival tribes. These enslaved Africans were then transported to the New World, where they worked on the plantations. The goods they produced were in turn shipped back to Europe for sale.



The Trans-Atlantic slave trade in theory. From Europe to Africa they took weapons and tools. They took slaves from Africa to America and from America they took sugar, tobacco and cotton to Europe.

The danger of profit

The land and climate of Saint-Domingue were (too) ideal for cultivating sugar and coffee. In the 18th century, it was the richest and most profitable colony in the entire world. About 40% of the sugar and 60% of the coffee (beans) consumed in Europe came from Saint-Domingue. Plantation owners on the island lived very well, and a growing desire emerged to produce more and thus earn more money. However, this required more laborers, so Saint-Domingue was flooded with enslaved people in order to increase production. As many as half a million (500,000) enslaved Africans were sent to the island, while there were only about 30,000 French colonists living there. The enslaved population was treated so brutally that it seemed only a matter of time before the system would collapse.



The French Revolution

Meanwhile, in the homeland of the occupiers, the Bastille was stormed in 1789, marking the outbreak of the French Revolution. A rebellion began against those in authority who made life miserable for ordinary citizens. *Liberté* (freedom), *Égalité* (equality), and *Fraternité* (brotherhood) were the three most important ideals of the Revolution. News of the Revolution naturally reached Saint-Domingue as well. An uprising in which an oppressed group violently confronted its oppressors and fought for equality sounded very familiar to many enslaved people. Thus, however ironic it may sound, the French Revolution became one of the inspirations for the Haitian Revolution.



The Storming of the Bastille (1789), which for many marks the beginning of the French Revolution. Source: historiek.net

On the road to humanity

That enslaved people had been watching events in France was clear, because two years later, in 1791, the Haitian Revolution broke out. Plantations were set on fire, and enslaved people rose up against their masters. Usually, such slave uprisings were short-lived, but the French now faced a serious problem. Because of this revolt, France was fighting on three different fronts. In addition to the slave uprising, it was also at war with both Spain and Great Britain—not to mention the fact that for every colonist on the island, there were about fifteen enslaved people.

France was at its weakest at this moment, and this created an opportunity for rebellion. This is where Toussaint Louverture enters the scene. Toussaint was a former enslaved man, but above all a clever strategist with strong military insight.



He understood that he had to take advantage of France's vulnerable position and became the face of the rebels. The enslaved population wanted their rights back.



A slave uprising in Saint-Domingue in 1791.

Source: Wikipedia.com

The uprising continues

After a successful revolt, Toussaint Louverture proclaimed the Black Republic of Haiti in 1801—a name that had already been used by the island's indigenous population before the arrival of the French. Despite French promises to abolish slavery, an expedition to Saint-Domingue was organized under the orders of Napoleon Bonaparte. Louverture was captured and taken to France. The French hoped that by removing Louverture, they could regain control of the island. However, Louverture's final words proved to be true: *"You may have cut down the trunk of the tree, but it will continue to grow."* The people of Saint-Domingue would not give up so easily.

He was right. After Louverture's disappearance, Jean-Jacques Dessalines came to the forefront. Under Louverture's leadership, Dessalines had been one of the standouts of the rebel army and was already seen as the ideal successor. When the French reintroduced slavery on the other colonial island of Guadeloupe, people in Saint-Domingue feared the same would happen to them. After the British blockaded access to the island, the French had virtually no chance of



reaching it effectively. Following the Battle of Vertières, Dessalines defeated the French once and for all.

The Aftermath

In 1804, the country was finally renamed Haiti, and Dessalines declared himself emperor under the name Jacques I. With this, Haiti became the first Black independent nation in the world and the second independent country in the New World since European expansion.

However, not everything was rosy. Dessalines ordered the execution of anyone even partly white—more than 3,000 people were killed. Even mixed-race individuals (children of European and African parents) had little place in the new society. Forced labor still persisted on the island. Jacques I was aware that the country lay in ruins and that plantations still needed to be worked in order to survive. The army had to remain strong; otherwise, the French could invade again. Although this was not slavery, it was still a form of forced labor.

The Haitian Revolution claimed roughly 350,000 lives, but it remains the only successful slave revolt in history.





The statue of Jacob I in Port-Au-Prince in Haïti. Source: wikipedia.org

In Conclusion

Life in Haiti has not been easy to this day. It is now one of the poorest countries in the world, and crime is still widespread. The Dutch government even issues a complete red travel advisory for the country. Behind Haiti's cities lies significant poverty and dissatisfaction, but that does not diminish the uniqueness of its story or the way the country is today. Haiti was born from an extraordinary struggle for freedom and equality—a nation founded by enslaved people who fought to break free from their oppressors. This is how Haiti was shaped into what it is today: a nation born from resistance.

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