On January 1st, 1804 the inhabitants of Saint-Domingue, now Haiti, declared independence from France. The declaration came after decades of dissension between the whites and blacks of the colony, which resulted in violence of the most extreme natures. In Avengers of the New World, Laurent Dubois states that “the revolution began as a challenge to French imperial authority by colonial whites, but it soon became a battle over racial inequality, and then over the existence of slavery itself.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Starting with the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789 and lasting through the Declaration of Independence in 1804, the heart of the Haitian Revolution was the war for equal human rights for those who were not white, especially the slaves.

The 18th century saw Saint-Domingue as becoming the biggest producer of sugar, and eventually coffee, in the entire world. By 1790 there were 258 sugar plantations on Saint-Domingue, and 90% of the population were slaves.[[2]](#footnote-2) Producing sugar required immense amounts of water, equipment, and especially: labor. When Coffee became prominent in the latter half of the century, the possibility for economic success doubled, since it did not have to compete with the production of sugar. Each crop required different terrain in order to sow and be harvested, sugar in the plains and coffee in the mountains. Millions back in France depended on the imports from Saint-Domingue for trade. The only way to keep up with the demand and expectations for the sugar and coffee production was to bring in hundreds of thousands of slaves. They worked in the face of brutal physical punishment, long hours, exhaustion, and not enough food.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The seeds of emancipation were laid back in 1686 with the King’s Code Noir. The code stipulated specific regulations for how slaves were to be treated by masters, managers, overseers, and slave drivers. The code was flouted by masters for the next 100 years. In fact, Dubois cites that “masters in Saint-Domingue responded to any attempt to interfere with their power over slaves with violent hostility and stubborn resistance.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Much of the hostility, as expected, was vexed toward the slaves themselves. Control over slaves was most commonly maintained through whipping. Other tortures included having peppers, salt, lemon, or ashes rubbed in wounds, and then have them burned with open flames. Several extreme cases of torture were also documented over the decades.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The slave insurrection of 1791 began in August with the convening of nocturnal meetings of slaves. That night, the first instance of violence was carried out, which only foreshadowed even worse brutality to come. The resistance was started by a man named Boukman, who brought together about a dozen slaves and seized the refiners apprentice at La Gossette, a small plantation of Gallifet, and massacred him before moving on to find the refiner. The overseer who tried to intervene were also shot. These were the first of possibly 100,000 who were killed during the Haitian Revolution. Dubois notes that “the insurrection of 1791 required community and leaders, and there is little doubt that religious practices facilitated the process of its organization.”[[6]](#footnote-6) A ceremonial ritual by the name of Bois-Caiman is said to have preceded the official start of the uprising. The ritual remains an important symbol for the achievement of the insurgents in helping to ensure emancipation.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Two men by the names of Jean-Francois and Biassou rose up as vital leaders to the slave rebellion. After many months of violent battle between the slaves and those who tried to contain them, they decided that they should try to stop the brutal killing by going directly to France to attempt a peaceful resolution. They requested that “the assembly would grant several hundred liberties to the insurgent leaders, who would distribute them among officers. The mass of the insurgents who were not granted freedom would be granted amnesty from punishment.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Opponents of this idea believed that by giving amnesty to slaves, they would no longer have to depend on their masters. This meant that ensuring their subordination in the future would be next to impossible. The idea was ultimately rejected and “a major opportunity to end the slave insurrection was lost.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Jean-Francois and Biassou would return to the colony and join their insurgent companions in wreaking havoc in Saint-Domingue, burning, pillaging, and killing.

On April 4th, 1792 France issued a decree granting free negroes equal political rights. They had gained an ally in the metropolitan government, and those who were free actually wished for the rebel slaves to return to their plantations, while granting freedom to some of the hundreds of leaders among their ranks. These men would form a police unit to keep order on plantations. Many insurgents kept fighting, even when France sent troops to battle against them. Most of them, however, succumbed to disease. The slave insurrection had so far impacted the slave trade in the fact that importation of new slaves had decreased substantially. In 1790 it is estimated that 50,000 new slaves were brought to Saint-Domingue. In 1792 that number was reduced to a mere 10,000. The slave insurgents were making slow progress toward eventual emancipation and political freedom.[[10]](#footnote-10)

1793 saw the entrance of the British into the fray. These troops allied with the white planters. They were seen as the “only hope” for bringing back slavery in its proper form and restoring the “old world”.[[11]](#footnote-11) In August of that year, a “white official drew up a petition on behalf of the colony’s slaves demanding the Rights of Man and general liberty.”[[12]](#footnote-12) He declared “Are we not men?” He proclaimed that as decreed by the Rights of Man, the rights of slaves could not be denied. The only way to save Saint-Domingue was to grant emancipation. “The nation would still receive rich products that were even more valuable because they came from free hands.”[[13]](#footnote-13) On August 24th, 1793, 15,000 voted in favor of emancipation. It was ratified on the 29th. However, this only applied to the North.

As liberty was introduced to the now ex-slaves, they proved their “worthiness” by going back to their plantations as salaried workers. They didn’t have to face the same brutality from managers and slave drivers, they could do their work and get compensation for it. They were even given opportunities to choose whether they got one or two days free a week, though their wages would be affected if they chose the latter.

In the South relations were still tense, and in early 1796 plantation workers revolted and several whites were killed. They believed they were being mistreated and not being paid enough. They also felt that they were being harassed. They said “they make us give them our chickens and our pigs when we go to sell them in town, and if we try to complain, we are stopped by the police, and they put us in prison and don’t feed us and we have to pay to get out.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Going into May in 1797, Paris attacked the emancipation. They believed Saint-Domingue was in disorder and believed they had abandoned their agricultural duties. They wanted the former slaves to have to sign contracts with their plantations and to restrict the emancipation of the Africans. One of the most famous leaders of the Revolution, Toussaint Louverture, attempted to fight for the freedom of the slaves. He pointed out that this kind of legislation would only frighten them into further uprising, and that the white planters needed to accept emancipation and gain the loyalty of the former slaves. The British began invading that summer, and recruited slaves to fight for them, forcing planters to hand over certain amounts of male slaves for the cause.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The French sent Gabriel Marie Theodore Joseph d’Hedouville to clean up Saint-Domingue and bring back peace. Instead, he ended up starting the most brutal phase of the Haitian Revolution. Dubois notes that he “had been given the mission of reestablishing the prosperity of agriculture in the colony. He was to oversee the return of plantations to their legitimate owners and apply a ‘uniform’ policy on plantation labor, one that provided what was necessary to the cultivators and appropriate to property owners.”[[16]](#footnote-16) In July all laborers had to sign three-year contracts with those in charge of their plantations. This, of course, was viewed as a restriction of the rights granted them by emancipation, and many resisted. Some even went to the lengths to rip up the registers where the contracts were supposed to be. Despite the efforts of the anti-aboliltionists, Saint-Domingue held on to its notions of liberty and freedom guaranteed by emancipation. By 1799 it is documented that “on the plains of Le Cap and throughout the colony, a new kind of life was taking root, one based on independence and subsistence, one that for many ex-slaves embodied true freedom.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

More decrees were passed by Louverture that restrict the freedom of possibility for the ex-slaves. Now, slaves could not buy plots of land bigger than three acres. Land was to be owned by the wealthy, and worked by the poor, thus instituting the racial and economic hierarchy desired of the anti-abolitionists again. Before this, some slaves would come together to purchase plots of land to grow their own goods and produce their own sustenance. The threat of violence was also being reintroduced, as managers once again threatened the possibility of physical punishment in return for inadequate work efforts.

In 1801 Louverture created a constitution which was “built on the foundation of his labor decrees.”[[18]](#footnote-18) He held an assembly akin to the First Continental Congress in the United States, in which they “decreed the colony a part of the French empire governed by a set of particular laws. In this territory, slaves could not exist; servitude is permanently abolished. All men within it are born, live, and die free and French.”[[19]](#footnote-19) It reiterated much of what Bonaparte’s constitution called for, yet Bonaparte was unsatisfied with what was happening in the colony. He did not necessarily want to reinstitute slavery, but he wanted to disarm them. If it meant having to bring back slavery, then he was okay with that. They played at embracing the liberty of the slaves in order to limit it. Dubois quotes that “it is when the true design shall be avowed, or being to unfold itself: when the negores shall discover, that not to the fasces of the Consul only, but to the whip of the driver, their submission is demanded, when the master shall take possession of his estate, and the bell and the loud report of the driver’s whip, announcing the approach of dawn, shall summon again to the field.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The old hierarchy was still seen as the proper system of politics and social life. However, the ex-slaves had endured almost ten years of freedom. They would fight back against anyone who tried to take it away.

The declaration of independence of Haiti “was a furious attack against the brutalities of the French, and a call for the members of the new nation to reject forever the past of empire and slavery.”[[21]](#footnote-21) It was modeled after Declaration of Independence drafted by the United States. The people of the new nation of Haiti swore that in the name of their rights to freedom they must reject France and everything it embodies for the rest of eternity. The “new nation was to channel the centuries of suffering of those pushed to the margins by the official activity of colonialism into a new political community meant to guarantee the eternal freedom of its scarred constituency.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

The long and violent Haitian Revolution devastated the economy and land of Haiti, much of which had been destroyed by the fires set by the insurgents. At least 100,000 people lost their lives, and many more were grievously injured. The revolution became a heavy influence in the future of the world around it.[[23]](#footnote-23) Not only did it help facilitate the Louisiana Purchase, but it helped Cuba pick up the sugar industry, and made those still aiding the industry of slavery have doubts about importing slaves from Africa. Decades later, it would inspire slaves all over the United States and help bring about their emancipation and the civil war. “Through writing, conversations, rumors, and nightmares and dreams, those who died for and lived through the Haitian Revolution became part of every society in the Atlantic world. They continue to speak to us, as founders in a long struggle for dignity and freedom that remains incomplete.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

References:

Dubois, Laurant. *Avengers of the New World.* Cambridge, MA. (Harvard Univ. Press.): 2004.

1. Laurant Dubois. *Avengers of the New World.* Cambridge, MA. (Harvard Univ. Press.): 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. IBID., pg. 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. IBID., pg. 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. IBID., pg. 45 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. IBID., pg. 63 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. IBID., pg. 101 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. IBID., pg. 103 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. IBID., pg. 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. IBID., pg. 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. IBID., pg. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. IBID., pg. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. IBID., pg. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. IBID., pg. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. IBID., pg. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. IBID., pg. 213-215. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. IBID., pg. 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. IBID., pg. 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. IBID., pg. 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. IBID., pg. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. IBID., pg. 257-258. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. IBID., pg. 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. IBID., pg. 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. IBID., pg. 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. IBID., pg. 304-305. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)