

Napoleon & the “Liberation” of Haiti

Colonialism & France



Social Studies 9

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Like many European countries, France had participated in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in the seventeenth century and had sent many Africans to work in its colonies in the West Indies (Caribbean).

France’s most important colony in the Caribbean was HAITI. Approximately 500,000 African men and women worked on the huge plantations in Haiti growing:

- sugar
- coffee
- cocoa
- cotton

Sugar cane was the most important crop of the time because it was highly desirable in Europe and brought in a lot of money in trade. However, African slaves in Haiti were hopeful when Napoleon took over France because the French Revolution had seen the law of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen which ensured everyone’s equality. They hoped that Napoleon would abolish slavery. BUT...he didn’t.

Napoleon promised the Haitian Slaves that he recognized their liberty and equal rights but had no intention of abolishing (getting rid of) slavery. The slaves, led by **TUSSAINT L’OUVERTURE** led the slaves into a revolt and claimed Haiti as an independent country from France. Napoleon was not impressed and sent 70 warships and 25,000 men to capture Toussaint and reclaim Haiti. When the troops got to Haiti, they convinced Toussaint that Napoleon wanted to see him in France and upon arriving in France, they put him in custody and sent him to prison.

BACK AT HOME....

Back at home, Napoleon was still conquering areas of Europe and did not have such a need for his allies in the West Indies any longer. Instead, he passed laws at home that actually supported slavery!

Napoleon and the Liberation of Haiti

*Remember, brave Negroes,
that France alone recognizes
your liberty and equal rights.*

—NAPOLEON'S DECLARATION TO
THE PEOPLE OF HAITI

Like many European countries, France had participated in the slave trade in the seventeenth century and had sent many Africans to work in its colonies in the West Indies. In later chapters, you will learn more about **colonialism**, and how it benefited Europe.

France's most important Caribbean colony was Haiti (formerly St. Domingue). Claimed by Christopher Columbus in 1492, Haiti was French-controlled by the late 1700s. By 1775, half of all the goods imported to Europe from the West Indies were going to France.

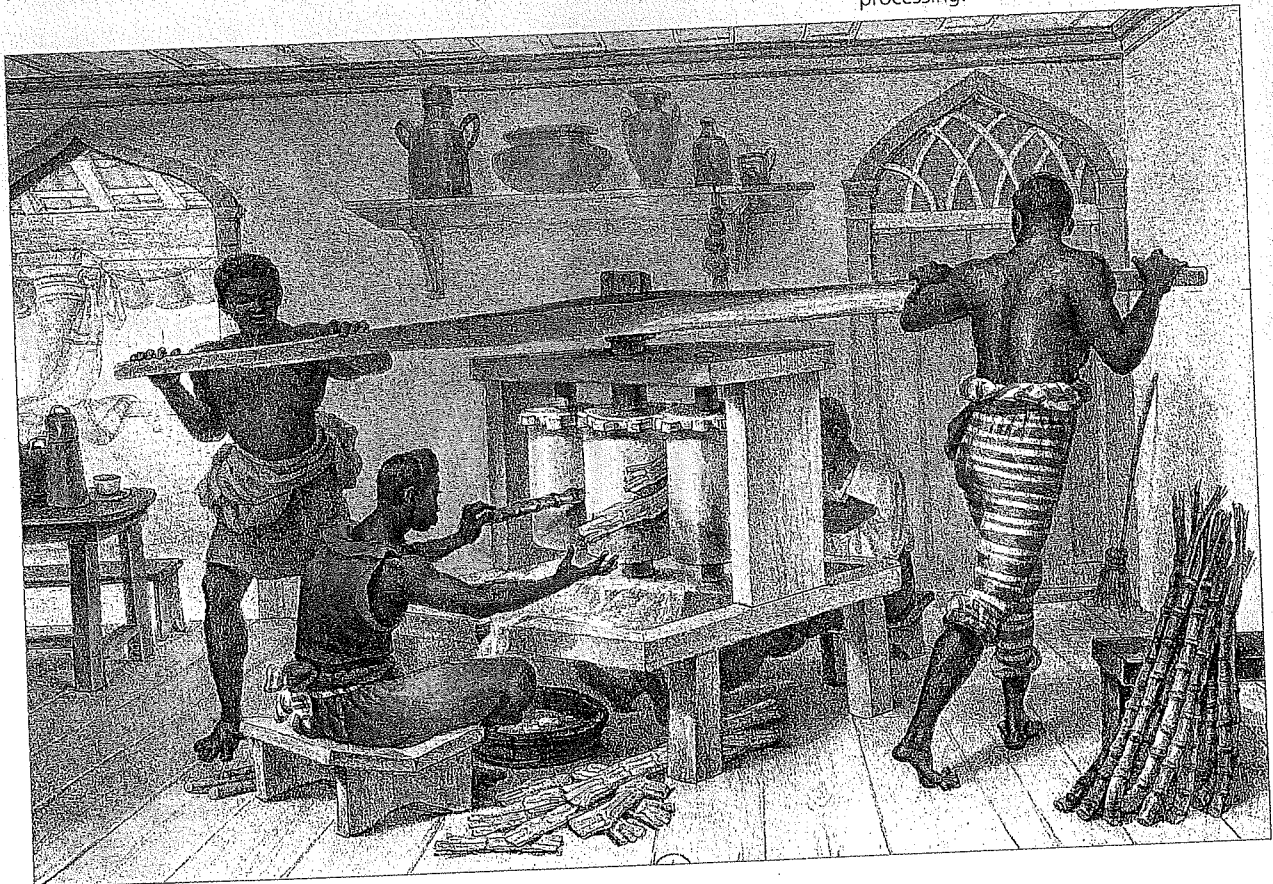
Approximately 500 000 African men and women worked on huge plantations in Haiti, growing sugar, coffee, cocoa, and cotton. Sugar cane was the most important crop, and its production exacted a terrible price. Most Africans died after ten years of plantation life because of the physical demands of clearing the land, harvesting the cane (at maturity, cane is taller than most humans), and processing the cane juice (see Figure 4-5).

Sugar was highly desirable in Europe. Like the newly fashionable tobacco, it was quickly habit-forming. One historian has noted: "We can only speculate vaguely about the extra energy which cane sugar must have injected into the bodies and minds of Europeans. It must have been quite an important

factor in Europe's rise to world dominance."

However, African slaves in Haiti were hopeful—they knew that the French Revolution had changed the world. To many, it seemed that the French

Figure 4-5 The pressing of sugar. After the sugar cane was harvested, it was brought quickly to the mill, where it was pressed and sent to the "boiling house." Despite the heat of the Caribbean, slaves working at this end of the production line were expected to stand day and night over boiling pots of sugar, skimming impurities off the top with a heavy ladle. The sugar needed to be transferred to at least five different pots before all its impurities were removed. Even so, this process resulted in basic raw sugar. Fully refined white sugar—the variety put in coffee or tea—underwent further processing.



continued

Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (see page 78) ensured everyone's equality. No longer could a person be denied his or her rights because of race. Leaders within slave communities also thought that France would outlaw slavery.

When Napoleon came to power, he gave indications that he wanted to end slavery. He promised slaves and former slaves that he would offer assistance if they would help him expel the British from Haiti. (England had invaded Haiti in 1793.) Of course, he had made similar promises to Italians and Germans, and had broken them.

Haitian leaders, such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Henri Christophe were forced to decide whether to fight for or against the French. Some were former slaves and all had experience training soldiers and leading troops. They knew that a deal with the French was risky, but calculated that the risk was worth taking. They were utterly committed to the **abolition** of slavery. The Haitian leaders helped the French by capturing several towns from the British and forcing the British to withdraw by 1798.

But Napoleon was alarmed by the events that were to unfold

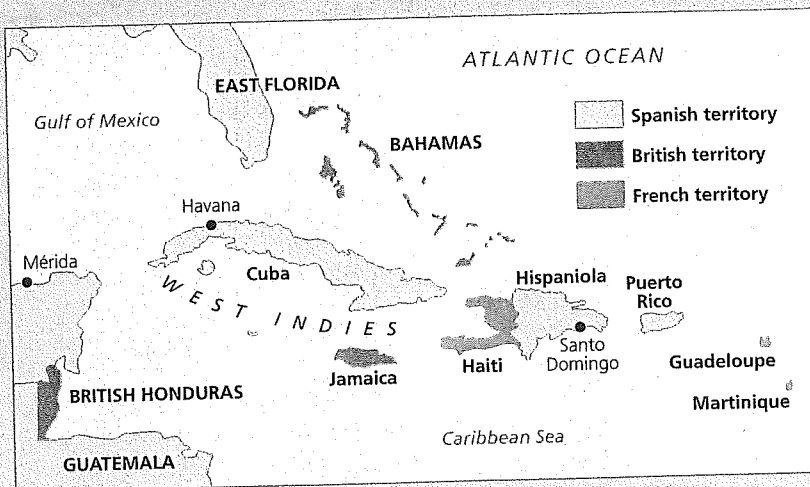


Figure 4-6 The West Indies in 1793

next. In 1801, Toussaint conquered the whole island of Haiti. He declared it an independent country and established a government with its own constitution. This event capped the first successful slave revolt in world history, one that had been brewing for ten years.

Napoleon knew that Haiti was too valuable to lose. He sent an expedition of seventy warships and 25 000 men to capture Toussaint. The leader was tricked into returning to France and imprisoned in the dungeon of Fort-de-Joux, where he died a year later.

As soon as Napoleon no longer needed allies in the West Indies, he passed laws at home that supported slavery.

But the clock could not be turned back in Haiti. It became independent in 1804—the first colony in the Americas, after the United States, to gain its freedom. At that time, all the French—about 30 000 colonists—were expelled.

colonialism: control of one part of the world by a powerful country, often for commercial advantage

abolition: doing away with

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Napoleon told the Africans of Haiti that he understood their plight. Did he? Explain.
2. Before the uprising in Haiti, would Europeans have believed that a slave revolt on this scale was possible? Why or why not?
3. Toussaint L'Ouverture was immortalized in a sonnet by the British poet Wordsworth. Read the sonnet (your teacher will supply you with a copy) and discuss its meaning with your classmates.
4. Find out more about Haiti today. What is its political status?



Figure 4-7 Toussaint L'Ouverture led the slave revolt in Haiti.