Haitian Revolutions: Crash Course World History #30

Crash Course: World History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=5A_o-nU5s2U
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/5A_o-nU5s2U

Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course World History. And apparently it's Revolutions Month here at Crash Course, because today we are going to discuss the often-neglected Haitian Revolutions. The Haitian Revolutions are totally fascinating and they involve two of my very favorite things:

1. Ending slavery, and
2. Napoleon getting his feelings hurt. I can't help myself, Napoleon. I like to see you suffer.

So, the French colony in Saint-Domingue began in the 17th century as a pirate outpost. And its original French inhabitants made their living selling leather and a kind of smoked beef called boucan. All that beef actually came from cattle left behind by the Spanish, who were the first Europeans to settle the island.

But anyway, after 1640, the boucan-sellers started to run low on beef. And they were like, "You know what would pay better than selling beef jerky? Robbing Spanish galleons," which as you'll recall were loaded with silver mined from South America. So, by the middle of the 17th century, the French had convinced many of those buccaneering captains to give up their pirating and settle on the island.

Many of them invested some of their pirate treasure in sugar plantations, which, by 1700 were thriving at both producing sugar and working people to death. And soon, this island was the most valuable colony in the West Indies, and possibly in the world. It produced 40% of Europe's sugar, 60% of its coffee, and it was home to more slaves than any place except Brazil.

And as you'll recall from our discussion of Atlantic slavery, being a slave in a sugar-production colony was exceptionally brutal. In fact, by the late 18th century, more slaves were imported to Saint-Domingue EVERY YEAR— more than 40,000— than the entire white population of the island. By the 19th century, slaves made up about 90% of the population.

And most of those slaves were African born, because the brutal living and working conditions prevented natural population growth. Like, remember Alfred Crosby's fantastic line, "it is crudely true that if man's caloric intake is sufficient, he will somehow stagger to maturity, and he will reproduce?" Yeah, well, not in 18th century Haiti, thanks to Yellow Fever and smallpox and just miserable working conditions. So, most of these plantations were pretty large, they often had more than 200 slaves, and many of the field workers— in some cases, a majority— were women.

Colonial society in Saint-Domingue was divided into four groups, which had important consequences for the revolution. At the top, were the Big White planters who owned the plantations and all the slaves. Often these Grand Blancs were absentee landlords who would just rather stay in France and let their agents do, you know, the actual brutality.

Below them were the wealthy free people of color. Most of the Frenchmen who came to the island were, you know, men, and they frequently fathered children with slave women. These fathers would often free their children. Wasn't that generous of them. So, by 1789, there were 24,800 free people of color along with about 30,000 white people in the colony. The free people of color contributed a lot to the island's stability. They served in the militia, and in the local constabulary, and many of the wealthier ones eventually owned plantations and slaves of their own.

And then, below them on the social ladder were the poor whites, or the petit blancs, who worked as artisans and laborers. And at the bottom were the slaves who made up the overwhelming majority.

I know what you're thinking: this is a recipe for permanent social stability. No, it wasn't. Okay, so when the French Revolution broke out in 1789, all these groups had something to complain about. The slaves, obviously, disliked being slaves. The free people of color were still subject to legal discrimination, no matter how wealthy they became.

And the poor whites, in addition to being poor, were resentful of all the privileges held by the wealthy people of color. And the Grand Blancs were complaining about French trade laws and the government's attempts to slightly improve the living and working conditions of slaves. Basically they were saying that government shouldn't be in the business of regulating business. So everyone was unhappy, but the slaves were by far the worst off.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! You're always saying how much slavery sucks, but is it really any worse than having to work for, like, subsis...

Yeah, I'm gonna stop you right there, Me from the Past, before you further embarrass yourself. You often hear from people attempting to comprehend the horrors of slavery that slavery couldn't have been all that bad, and that it wasn't that different from working for minimum wage. And that we know this because if it HAD been so bad, slaves would have just revolted, which they never did. Yeah. Well,
1. equating slavery to poor working conditions ignores the fact that if you work at, like, Foxconn, Foxconn doesn't get to sell your children to other corporations. And
2. As you are about to see, SLAVES DID REVOLT.

So, the unrest in what became Haiti started in 1789 when some slaves heard a rumor that the King of France had freed them. Even though it was across the ocean, word of the changes in France reached the people of Haiti, where The Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen, while terrifying to planters, gave hope both to free people of color and to slaves.

At the same time, some petit blancs argued that there was inadequate discrimination against blacks. They identified with the third estate in France, and they called for interest rates to be lowered so they could more easily pay their debts. And they began lobbying for colonial independence.

The psychology here shows you the extent to which slaves were not considered people. I mean, these radical petit blancs thought that they were the oppressed people in Saint-Domingue because they couldn't afford to own slaves. And they thought if they could become independent from France, they could take power from the people of privilege and institute a democracy where everyone had a voice-- except for the 95% of people who weren't white.

Then in 1791, these radical petit blancs seized the city of Port-au-Prince. You'll remember that by 1791, France was at war with most of Europe, and just like with the 7 Years' War, the wars of Revolutionary France played out in the colonies as well as at home. So the French government sent troops to Saint-Domingue.

Meanwhile, urges toward liberty, fraternity, and equality were only growing in France, and it didn't seem very equitable to grant citizenship based solely on race. So in May of 1791, the National Assembly gave full French citizenship to all free men of color. I mean, if they owned property, and had enough money, and weren't the children of slaves. The petit blancs weren't thrilled about this, and that led to fighting breaking out between them and the newly French free people of color.

And then in August of 1791, the slaves were like, "Um, hi, yes. Screw all of you." And a massive slave revolt broke out. Among the

leaders of this revolt was Toussaint Bréda, a former slave of full African descent, who later took the name Toussaint L'ouverture. L'Ouverture helped mold the slaves into a disciplined army that could withstand attacks from the French troops.

But again, the context of the wider revolution proves really important here. So, the Spanish had consistently supported slave revolts in Saint-Domingue hoping to weaken the French. But, by 1793 they were offering even more support. In fact, L'Ouverture became an officer in the Spanish military because the emancipation of the slaves was more important to him than maintaining his rights as a French Citizen.

So then, in October of 1793 the British, whom as I'm sure you'll recall were also at war with France, decided to invade Saint-Domingue. And at that point, the French military commanders were like, We are definitely going to lose this war if we fight the British, the Spanish, and the slaves, so let's free the slaves. So they issued decrees freeing the slaves and on February 4, 1794 the National Convention in Paris ratified those decrees.

By May, having learned of the Convention's actions, L'Ouverture switched allegiances to the French and turned the tide of the war. Thus, the most successful slave revolt in human history won freedom and citizenship for every slave in the French Caribbean. But emancipation didn't end the story because the French were still at war with the Spanish and the English in Saint-Domingue. Luckily for France, L'Ouverture was an excellent general, and luckily for the people of the island, L'Ouverture was also an able politician. And between 1794 and 1802, he successfully steered the colony toward independence.

So, although slavery was abolished, this didn't end the plantation system because both L'Ouverture and his compatriot André Rigaud believed that sugar was vital to the economic health of the island. But now at least people were paid for their labor and their kids couldn't be sold. Now you can compare it to Foxconn.

But soon, L'Ouverture and Rigaud came into conflict over Rigaud's refusal to give up control over one of the Southern states on the island, and there was a civil war, which L'Ouverture, with the help of his able lieutenant Jacques Dessalines, was able to win after 13 months of hard fighting. L'Ouverture then passed a new constitution, and things were going pretty well on Saint-Domingue with the small problem that it was still technically part of France, which meant that it was about to be ruled by Napoleon Bonaparte. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

So, in 1799, Napoleon seized power in France in a coup. And, his new regime, called the Consulate (because he was the First Consul à la the Roman Republic) established a new constitution that specifically pointed out its laws did not apply to France's overseas colonies.

Napoleon had plans to reconstruct France's empire in North America that it had lost most of in the 7 Years' War, and to do this he needed tons of money from France's most valuable colony, Saint-Domingue. And the best way to maximize profits? Why, to reintroduce slavery, of course. That's certainly what the former slaves thought was the plan when in 1802, a French expedition commanded by Napoleon's brother in-law Charles-Victor-Emmanuel "I-Have-Too-Many-Names" Leclerc showed up in Saint-Domingue.

This started the second phase of the Haitian revolution, the fight for independence. So, Leclerc eventually had L'Ouverture arrested and shipped to France where he died in prison in 1803. But this itself did not spark an uprising against the French because L'Ouverture wasn't actually that popular, largely because he wanted most blacks on the island to continue to grow sugar.

Instead, the former slaves only started fighting when Leclerc tried to take away their guns, thus beginning a guerrilla war that the French, despite their superior training and weapons, had absolutely no chance of winning. Although the French were exceedingly cruel, executing women as well as men and importing man-eating dogs from Cuba, the Haitians had the best ally of all: Disease, specifically in the form of Yellow Fever, which killed thousands of French soldiers, including Leclerc himself. Oh, it's time for the Open Letter?

Stan! Where is my chair? Stan, you're telling me the yellow chair has been lost? The yellow chair is the star of the show. The stars, in order, are 1. me, 2. yellow chair, 3. the chalkboard, 4. Danica, 5. Meredith the Intern, 6. you, Stan. You're sixth. Oh, I'm mad. Let's see what's in the secret compartment today. It's a giant squid of anger!!! I'M A GIANT SQUID OF ANGER!!!! Oh, no. It broke.

An open letter to disease. Dear disease, why do you always put yourself at the center of human history?

Most of you are just tiny, little single-celled organisms, but you're so self-important and self-involved that you're always interfering with us. Admittedly, sometimes you work for the good guys, but usually you don't. It seems like even though you're constantly interfering with human history, you don't even care about it.

I just hate when people, and also microbes, are super self-involved. Like, don't tell me you gotta take a day off to go to your mom's birthday party, Stan. That's not imagining me complexly. I've got needs over here.

Best wishes, John Green.

So continued defeat and the death of his troops eventually convinced Napoleon to give up his dreams of an American empire and cut his losses. He recalled his surviving troops, of the 40,000 who left, only 8,000 made it back. And then, he sold Thomas Jefferson Louisiana. And that is how former slaves in Haiti gave America all of this.

On January 1, 1804, Dessalines who had defeated the French, declared the island of Saint-Domingue independent and re-named it Haiti, which is what the island had been called by the native inhabitants before the arrival of Columbus. The Haitian Declaration of Independence was a rejection of France and, to a certain degree of European racism and colonialism.

It also affirmed, to quote from the book Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, "a broad definition of the new country as a refuge for enslaved peoples of all kinds." So, why is this little island so important that we would devote an entire episode to it? First, Haiti was the second free and independent nation state in the Americas. It also had one of the most successful slave revolts ever. Haiti became the first modern nation to be governed by people of African descent, and they also foiled Napoleon's attempts to build a big new world empire.

Of course, Haiti's history since its revolution has been marred by tragedy, a legacy of the loss of life that accompanied the revolution. I mean, 150,000 people died in 1802 and 1803 alone. But the Haitian revolutions matter. They matter because the Haitians, more than any other people in the age of revolutions, stood up for the idea that none should be slaves, that the people who most need the protection of a government should be afforded that protection. Haiti stood up for the weak when the rest of the world failed to. The next time you read about Haiti's poverty, remember that. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Danica Johnson. The show is ably interned by Meredith Danko. And our graphics team is Thought Bubble. Oh, right, I write it with my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer. Actually, he does most of the work, who am I kidding.

Last week's phrase of the week was "fancy footwear." If you want to guess this week's phrase of the week or suggest future ones, you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions that will be answered by our team of historians.

Thanks for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my home town, Don't Forget To Be Awesome. ...woo!