



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

EFLA STUDY GUIDE

UNIT 3: Trans Atlantic Slave Trade (1400 – 1865)

CLASS 4: Haitian Revolution

OVERVIEW

In 1804, on the heels of the French Revolution, the Republic of Haiti emerged as the first Black nation in the Western hemisphere. Not only did Africans successfully overthrow the institution of slavery, they also ended French colonial rule. This event sent shockwaves throughout the entire Western world. It instilled fear in slave-owners far and wide, and it inspired hope among enslaved populations who staged their own rebellions against slavery, including slave revolts in Louisiana and Virginia. Led by Toussaint L'Overture, Henri Christophe, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the Haitian Revolution achieved what many thought to be virtually impossible—the eradication of white domination.

European Conquest and the Enslavement of Africans

Haiti was originally named **Ayiti**, one of the names given to the land by the indigenous Taíno people of the Arawakan nation. The entire island, which constituted modern day Haiti and Dominican Republic, was invaded by Christopher Columbus in 1492 under the sponsorship of the Spanish Crown who renamed the island *La Isla Espanola*, later named *Hispaniola*. The Spanish conquest was so destructive, the indigenous population declined from a half million to roughly 60,000 over the course of 15 years. The devastation and murder of the native population led to the importation of enslaved Africans in the early 1500s.

It was not until 1695 that the French finally won legal rights to the western part of Hispaniola (modern day Haiti), which they renamed Saint Domingue. The French had been in fierce competition with Spain and Britain for control over the island. To fuel their new colony, the French kidnapped thousands of Africans and transported them to Saint Domingue. In 1701 there were approximately 20,000 slaves on the island. By 1790, there were 500,000 enslaved Africans and 30,000 whites. Saint Domingue also had the largest and wealthiest population of free people of color, most of whom were bi-racial, totaling 25,000 people. Like many slave societies, enslaved Africans outnumbered the white ruling class by far, which led to extremely brutal practices and strict laws to maintain white domination.

Undoubtedly, Saint Domingue was a goldmine for the development of modern Western nations. The production of coffee, sugar, tobacco, indigo and cotton by enslaved Africans was the backbone of the French economy and the rise of [global capitalism](#).

The Age of Revolution

In 1789, the outbreak of the French Revolution sparked civil war in Saint Domingue as various classes within the population (including free people of color) demanded independence, legal rights and citizenship. It was during the French Revolution when new national concepts emerged such as *natural rights*, *liberty*, *universal rights* and *individual freedom*. Yet, how could the French demand liberty and individual rights and simultaneously support the [plundering](#), enslavement and oppression of African and native populations?

In the spirit of human freedom, African [revolutionaries](#) called on their communities to rise up! From 1791 – 1804, Africans fought fiercely against slavery and [colonialism](#) and defeated the strongest militaries in the world. After a bloody struggle in which 100,000 Africans and 24,000 whites were killed, Jean-Jacques Dessalines declared independence on January 1, 1804 and renamed the island Haiti (adapted from its original Taíno name Ayiti)—which means “Land of Mountains.”

Haiti emerged as a symbol of pride in the African Diaspora, but the Black-led nation paid a severe price. France refused to recognize Haitian independence until it was paid 150 million francs in [reparations](#) for “lost property”—the equivalent to \$20 billion in today’s economy. In 1838, the “[indemnity](#)” was reduced to 90 million francs to be paid over 30 years. Western nations, including the United States, joined together to sanction and isolate Haiti, forcing the country into extraordinary debt and unjust economic relations. For more than 100 years, Haiti paid this debt, plus interest, until its final payment in 1947.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

Review the following material: (65 minutes):

[PBS Documentary--Egalite for All: Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution \(55 minutes\)](#)

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOGVgQYX6SU>

Study Questions

1. According to the documentary, why was the Haitian Revolution one of the most profound revolutions initiated by human beings?
2. Haiti was the world leader in the production of which commodity?

3. What was "rational management"?
4. How did Toussaint L'Ouverture's background influence his involvement in the revolution?
5. What role did Vodou (widely referred to as "Voodoo") play in the Haitian Revolution?
6. Which country did Napoleon conquer during the time of the French and Haitian Revolutions?
7. According to Napoleon, what was the primary motivation behind his invasion of Haiti in 1802?

“Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” (15 minutes)

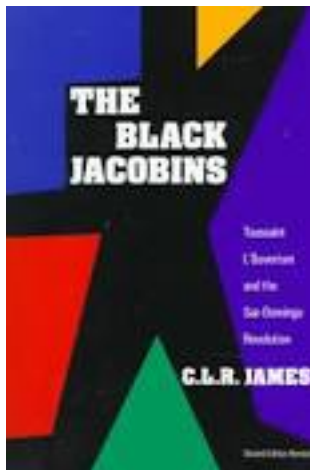
http://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Declaration_of_the_Rights_of_Man_and_of_the_Citizen

Study Questions

1. How does the “Declaration of the Rights of Man” define freedom?
2. Which passages do you think may have served as inspiration to the Haitian Revolution and why?

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Books and Articles



C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*

From Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia:

The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution (1938), by Afro-Trinidadian writer C. L. R. James (4 January 1901–19 May 1989), is a history of the 1791–1804 Haitian Revolution. The text places the revolution in the context of the French Revolution, and focuses on the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture, who was born a slave but rose to prominence espousing the French Revolutionary ideals of liberty and equality. These ideals, which many French revolutionaries

did not maintain consistently with regard to the black humanity of their colonial possessions, were embraced, according to James, with a greater purity by the persecuted blacks of Haiti; such ideals "meant far more to them than to any Frenchman."

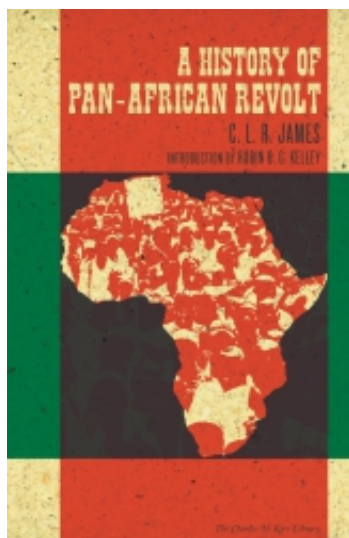
James examines the brutal conditions of slavery as well as the social and political status of the slave-owners, poor or "small" whites, and "free" blacks and mulattoes leading up to the Revolution. The work explores the dynamics of the Caribbean economy and the European feudal system during the era before the Haitian Revolution, and places each revolution in comparative historical and economic perspective. Toussaint L'Ouverture becomes a central and symbolic character in James' narrative of the Haitian Revolution. His complete embodiment of the revolutionary ideals of the period was, according to James, incomprehensible even to the revolutionary French, who did not seem to grasp the urgency of these ideals in the minds and spirits of a people rising from slavery. L'Ouverture had defiantly asserted that he intended:

...to cease to live before gratitude dies in my heart, before I cease to be faithful to France and to my duty, before the god of liberty is profaned and sullied by the liberticides, before they can snatch from my hands that sword, those arms, which France confided to me for the defense of its rights and those of humanity, for the triumph of liberty and equality.

The French bourgeoisie could not understand this motivation, according to James, and mistook it for rhetoric or bombast. "Rivers of blood were to flow before they understood," James writes.

James concluded:

The cruelties of property and privilege are always more ferocious than the revenges of poverty and oppression. For the one aims at perpetuating resented injustice, the other is merely a momentary passion soon appeased.



C.L.R. James, *The Pan-African Revolt*

"A History of Pan-African Revolt is one of those rare books that continues to strike a chord of urgency, even half a century after it was first published. Time and time again, its lessons have proven to be valuable and relevant for understanding liberation movements in Africa and the diaspora. Each generation who has had the opportunity to read this small book finds new insights, new lessons, new visions for their own age.... No piece of literature can substitute for a crystal ball, and only religious fundamentalists believe that a book can provide comprehensive answers to all questions. But if nothing else, A History of Pan-African Revolt leaves us with two incontrovertible facts. First, as long as black people are denied freedom, humanity and a decent standard of living,

they will continue to revolt. Second, unless these revolts involve the ordinary masses and take place on their own terms, they have no hope of succeeding.” —Robin D.G. Kelley, Introduction

On-line Resources

History of Haiti 1492-1805, Brown University Library

Link: <http://library.brown.edu/haitihistory/5.html>

The Louverture Project

http://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Main_Page