Slavery in Saint-Domingue

From TLP

Slaves at work in Saint-Domingue.

Saint-Domingue newspaper article mentioning four runaway slaves. The 1926 Slavery Convention described slavery as "...the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised..." Therefore, a slave is someone who cannot leave an owner or employer without explicit permission, and who will be returned if they escape. Control may be accomplished through official or tacit arrangements with local authorities by masters who have some influence because of their social or economic status.

Slavery was commonly used in the parts of the Caribbean controlled by France or the British Empire. The Lesser Antilles islands of Barbados, Antigua (British colonies), Martinique and Guadeloupe (French colonies), which were the first important slave societies of the Caribbean, began the widespread use of African slaves by the end of the 17th century, as their economies converted from tobacco to sugar production.

In Saint-Domingue slaves were mainly used for the production of sugar, coffee, cotton and indigo, making the French colony the richest at the time and producing a vast wealth for France and its citizens. The emerging classes of the French bourgeoisie were a driving force behind the French Revolution and sought to shield their profits from the interference and taxation of the king. Many of the merchants living of the slave-trade and the fruits of slave labor, were located in French coastal cities such as Bordeaux and Nantes.
Early slavery

Slavery started from the beginning of the European colonization of Hispaniola through ruthless and cruel governors, such as Nicolás de Ovando in the early 1600’s. After genocidal warfare, slavery and many massacres had decimated the indigenous Taíno and the enslavement of natives of other islands was not sufficient to guarantee the European colonizers profits, Ovando was the first to bring African slaves to the colony, and therefore to the Americas.

Triangular trade

The slavery system in the Antilles was based on the triangular trade. European ships sailed from Europe south to Africa to acquire slaves, which were then transported to the slave holding colonies in the Western Hemisphere. Upon arrival they would discharge the Africans, now pressed into bondage and load agricultural products such as indigo, sugar, coffee and rum (distilled from sugarcane). These items were shipped back to Europe. The ships maximized the use of currents and wind to make their voyage, which resulted in a triangle when drawn on a map, therefore the name. The enslaved Africans were not docile. Slaves on slave ships jumped overboard, went on vast hunger strikes, attacked the crews. There are records of slaves overcoming the crew and taking the ship into harbor, a feat of tremendous revolutionary daring. (James) This form of trade was especially prevalent throughout the 18th and the early 19th century. The trade was highly profitable for European merchants, who were able to amass great riches for which countless slaves died.

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Treatment of slaves
The slaves were treated terribly, often beaten and raped as well as tortured and outright murdered. They had such miserable lives that death was considered a welcome release.

By the middle of the 18th century, British Jamaica and French Saint-Domingue had become the largest slave societies of the region, rivaling Brazil as a destination for enslaved Africans. Due to overwork, the death rates for Caribbean slaves were higher than birth rates, this was especially true in the north of Saint-Domingue. The conditions led to increasing numbers of slave revolts and campaigns against slavery in Europe.

Abolitionist groups

1795 Medallion of the British Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Towards the end of the 18th century several anti-slavery groups formed in the colonizing countries, such as the British Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in which Thomas Clarkson was a prominent member and the Amis des Noirs in Paris, France. Such abolitionist groups worked closely with people in Saint-Domingue such as Vincent Ogé, who received financial support to purchase weapons from Clarkson and met with several members of the Amis des Noirs while pressing the cause for (mulatto) emancipation in Paris.

Abolishment of slavery in Haiti
1794 publication of Sonthonax's proclamation abolishing slavery. On August 29, 1793 French Commissioner Léger Félicité Sonthonax declared the emancipation of the slaves of St. Domingue, this had at first limited impact until the final victory of the Haitian Revolution in 1804. The first constitution of the newly independent nation, the Haitian Constitution of 1805 promulgated under Jean-Jacques Dessalines states in Art. 2: Slavery is forever abolished. The Haitian Revolution was the first successful slave revolt and had a profound impact on slavery in the of the Western Hemisphere, as slaves and others that sought to abolish this form of human bondage, looked to Haiti and her accomplishments as role model to end slavery everywhere.

Dessalines victory over the French

It was Jean-Jacques Dessalines final victory over the troops sent by Napoléon Bonaparte that ensured the freedom of the ex-slaves. (see also: Napoléon's Caribbean Genocide) The abolishment of slavery in Saint-Domingue was the leading goal of the Haitian Revolution and it is to Dessalines credit that attempts to re-enslave Haitians were unsuccessful. Unlike in Guadeloupe where General Richepanse crushed the local resistance and returned the colony into the very cruel forms of slavery that Haitians finally freed themselves of in 1804.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

On December 10, 1948, almost 144 years after Haitians successfully abolished slavery in 1804, the United Nations General Assembly in Paris proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (General Assembly resolution 217 A (III)). Article 4 states in regard to the issue of slavery:

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

(Kreyòl: Yo pa gen dwa kimbe pèson nan esklavaj ni fòsel ekzekite yon travay; esklavaj avek komès esklav entèdi kèl ke swa jan yap fèl la.)

Note 1: See: Decree abolishing slavery in the North of Saint-Domingue - Text of the original Creole language version published by Sonthonax in 1793.
See also

- **Maroons** - Runaway slaves.
- **Nicolás de Ovando** - Spanish Governor of Hispaniola; enslaved the native **Taíno** and was the first to bring African slaves to the Americas.

Abolitionism

- **Amis des Noirs** - French anti-slavery society.
- **Category: Abolitionists**

Documents

- **Le Code Noir** - 1689 document regulating slavery in the French colonies.
- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Deklarasyon Inivèsel Dwa De Lom)** - Text of the 1948 United Nations declaration. (Haitian Creole)
- **Decree abolishing slavery in the North of Saint-Domingue** - 1793 decree by Sonthonax (Haitian Creole text).
  - Sonthonax Broadside 1793 - Sonthonax defending his decree freeing the slaves.
- **Napoléon decree re-establishing slavery in the French colonies** - From May of 1802 (French text).

References


External links

- Wikipedia: **Slavery in the British and French Caribbean**

Images

Comité pour la mémoire de l'esclavage: L'esclavage par l'image - Image resources regarding slavery in the French colonies (French text).


Category: Glossary

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