

FURTHER BACKGROUND INFORMATION

FOR TEACHERS: HISTORY

First encounters 1492-1789



Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons (PD-US).

16th century depiction of Christopher Columbus landing in America.

In 1492, Cristoforo Colombo - also known in Spain as Cristobal Colon and in the UK as Christopher Columbus – landed in Haiti. He had sailed across the Atlantic from Spain in the Santa Maria with three other ships. He was welcomed by the people who lived there, the Taino, who were wearing gold ornaments. 'Haiti' is a Taino word meaning 'land of high mountains'. The Spanish called the island Hispaniola.

Columbus returned to Spain with news of his 'discovery' and came back to Hispaniola a year later. The Spanish were very interested in gold and forced the Taino to mine gold for them. Thousands of Taino were killed. Thousands more died from European diseases such as measles because they had no immunity. The Taino were almost totally wiped out by the Spanish conquest.

When more gold and silver was discovered in other parts of Latin America, the Spanish began to lose interest in the island. French, Dutch and English pirates began to use the island as a base to raid ships travelling to Europe. In 1660 French settlers arrived and began to farm coffee, indigo and sugarcane. They imported slaves from West Africa to do the work.

Eventually Spain gave the western part of the island to France and they called it San Domingue. The colony became a very successful exporter of coffee and sugar and by 1789 it exported 60% of the world's sugar and coffee. Many forests in Haiti were cut down to make space for these cash crops. Around 800,000 slaves lived on the island. The conditions that they lived in were so terrible that they



only lived for an average of five years. To replace those that died, tens of thousands of new slaves were being imported each year.

In 1789, France published the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man' but although this stated a commitment to the rights of all men, France did not want to extend these rights to the slaves in Haiti.

Slave revolt 1791-1865

In 1791, slaves, former slaves and mixed-race descendants of slaves in Haiti were inspired by news of the revolution in France to rise up against the slave owners. They rose in revolt under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture, a freed slave who, very unusually, was able to read and write. Within a few weeks over 1000 coffee estates and 200 sugar plantations had been burned and their workers freed.

In 1794 France abolished slavery in all their colonies, but the struggle for freedom was not over. A few years later, the French decided to recapture San Domingue and re-establish slavery. In 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte sent an army led by his brother-in-law, Charles Leclerc, to reintroduce slavery but Toussaint's forces successfully resisted. In 1802 the French invited Toussaint to talk about a peace treaty. However, this was a trick.

Instead of negotiating, the French kidnapped him, took him to France and put him in prison where he later died.



Jean Jacques Dessalines became the first Emperor of independent Haiti. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons (PD-US)

Meanwhile, a new leader in Haiti emerged: Jean-Jacques Dessalines. He defeated the French and Haiti declared independence on New Year's Day in 1804. Haitians had led the only successful slave rebellion leading to independence in the Caribbean. It gave hope to many other freedom movements, especially in the USA. Dessalines became the first emperor of Haiti, known as Jacques I, but Haiti faced many problems. No other country would recognise the first independent state because they feared that slaves in their own countries would also revolt. They blocked all trade with Haiti, keeping it poor.

It was only 21 years later that France eventually agreed to recognise Haiti as an independent country. However, the French insisted that Haitians pay 150 million gold francs to their former slave owners for lost business. In effect they wanted Haiti's black population to buy their freedom. Haiti had to borrow this money from French banks and later others in Germany and the USA too who charged high interest rates. The country only finished paying back this money in 1947. Paying this debt kept Haiti poor.

Meanwhile, the USA did not recognise Haiti as an independent country until 1865 at the end of its own civil war which resulted in the freedom of all its slaves.



Turbulent times 1915-1986

By 1915, the island of Haiti was struggling. Not being recognised as an independent country for so long after it declared independence in 1804 made trading with other countries like the USA and France difficult. As a result the freed population of Haiti moved away from the cities to farms where they could grow their own food. These families operated under little leadership.

Central government was weak and by the early twentieth century, six presidents had been overthrown. Meanwhile the USA was becoming more powerful and looking for opportunities to improve its wealth through trade. In 1915, the USA invaded Haiti and occupied it for 19 years until 1934, following significant Haitian resistance, including from writers and other artists. During this time they put down rebellions by Haitians and built up the capital city, Port-au-Prince, as a centre of power. This made ruling the island easier.



Haitian president François Duvalier, known as Papa Doc (bottom right) at his coronation as president for life. Photo credit: Shaula, Wikimedia Commons.

After the USA left, Haitian presidents continued to build up the capital city. By the start of this century nearly one third of Haitians were living in or near Port-au-Prince, the epicentre of the 2010 earthquake. The epicentre means the point where the force of the earthquake is strongest.

Haiti did have a period of peace and relative prosperity in the 1950s because the USA, rich after WWII, was investing in Haiti.

Following a hurricane in 1954, the Haitian government was slow to provide for people's needs and some officials stole aid money. As a result, anti-government protests forced a general election.

In 1957, a new president, François Duvalier, also known as Papa Doc, was elected with the support of the USA. He became a dictator, declaring himself president for life and killing his rivals. He replaced the army with his own secret police. Although he became very rich, ordinary Haitians remained poor.

After Papa Doc died in 1971, his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier, known as Baby Doc, took over. He was only 19 when he became president. His leadership was also dictatorial and led to the country becoming poorer. Eventually, in 1986, he was driven out of Haiti following enormous protests by the Haitian people. During their thirty years of rule, the Duvaliers had not only stolen a great deal of Haiti's money but they had also driven out many of Haiti's most educated men and women. One in six had fled the country.



Growing divisions 1986-2010



Jean-Bertrand Aristide meets US president Bill Clinton. Photo credit: White House, Wikipedia Commons.

After the Duvaliers had left power in 1986, Haiti faced a time of uncertainty. The government was overthrown several times by the army (this act is called a coup). Eventually, in 1990, a former Catholic priest, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who had spoken out against Papa and Baby Doc, was elected president with strong support. Aristide worked to improve the lives of Haitians. He started a campaign to teach reading and writing, and raised wages. Yet within a year he had been forced out of power and into exile by the army in another military coup.

In 1994, the USA helped to reinstate Aristide as president. He disbanded the Haitian army and replaced it with a small police force supported by UN peace-keeping missions. In the next elections in 1995, Aristide was replaced by Rene Preval.

The involvement of the USA in Haiti has been controversial for many decades. For example, not only was the USA controversially involved in reinstating presidents, it also affected Haiti's farming industry. In 1980, Haiti was able to grow nearly all its own rice. However, so-called "dumping" of cheap rice from the USA on Haiti virtually destroyed Haiti's own rice-growing industry. By 2010, Haiti was importing around 80% of its rice making Haitians vulnerable to changing (and often increasing) world food prices*.

Following the general election in 2000, Aristide returned to power as president again, but there were more coup attempts and UN forces were still needed to keep order. There were more cases of political and gang violence in Port-au-Prince. Some severe hurricanes hit Haiti in 2004 and these made life harder for many people. Aristide was forced out of power by a military coup once again. In 2006, Rene Preval became president again and he was leading the country when the 2010 earthquake struck.

Life during the years before the earthquake has been difficult for most Haitians. There was often violence between supporters of different political groups and gangs. In 2008 there were food riots and four hurricanes in quick succession. In November that year, a badly-built school in Port-au-Prince collapsed with around 500 pupils and teachers inside. Many of those who had enough money chose to leave the country. Today 85% of Haiti's most educated people live outside the country.

Haiti is currently the poorest country in the Western hemisphere and continues to be troubled by violence between rival gangs and rising crime. The United Nations has described the human rights situation as 'catastrophic'. There is also a huge wealth gap between the minority Haiti's French-speaking rich (1% of them own nearly half the country's wealth) and majority Creole-speaking poor. There are other examples of great inequality in Haiti, particularly in the way in which land is shared between Haitian people.



Rene Preval. Photo credit: Agência Brasil, Wikimedia Commons.

*For further information on the effect of USA rice subsidies on Haiti farmers, see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-11472874>