

# III. Labour & Epidemics

Working conditions, Haiti revolution, and the Yellow Fever

EE406: Contemporary Economic Issues

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# Saint-Domingue

Napoleon, Yellow Fever, and Revolution

# War & Disease

- Late 1804: Jean-Jacques Dessalines – a leader of the largest insurrection of all slaves rebellions – declared Haiti an independent nation
- Losing Haiti – “Saint-Domingue” – Napoleon abandoned his vision of French empire in the Americas

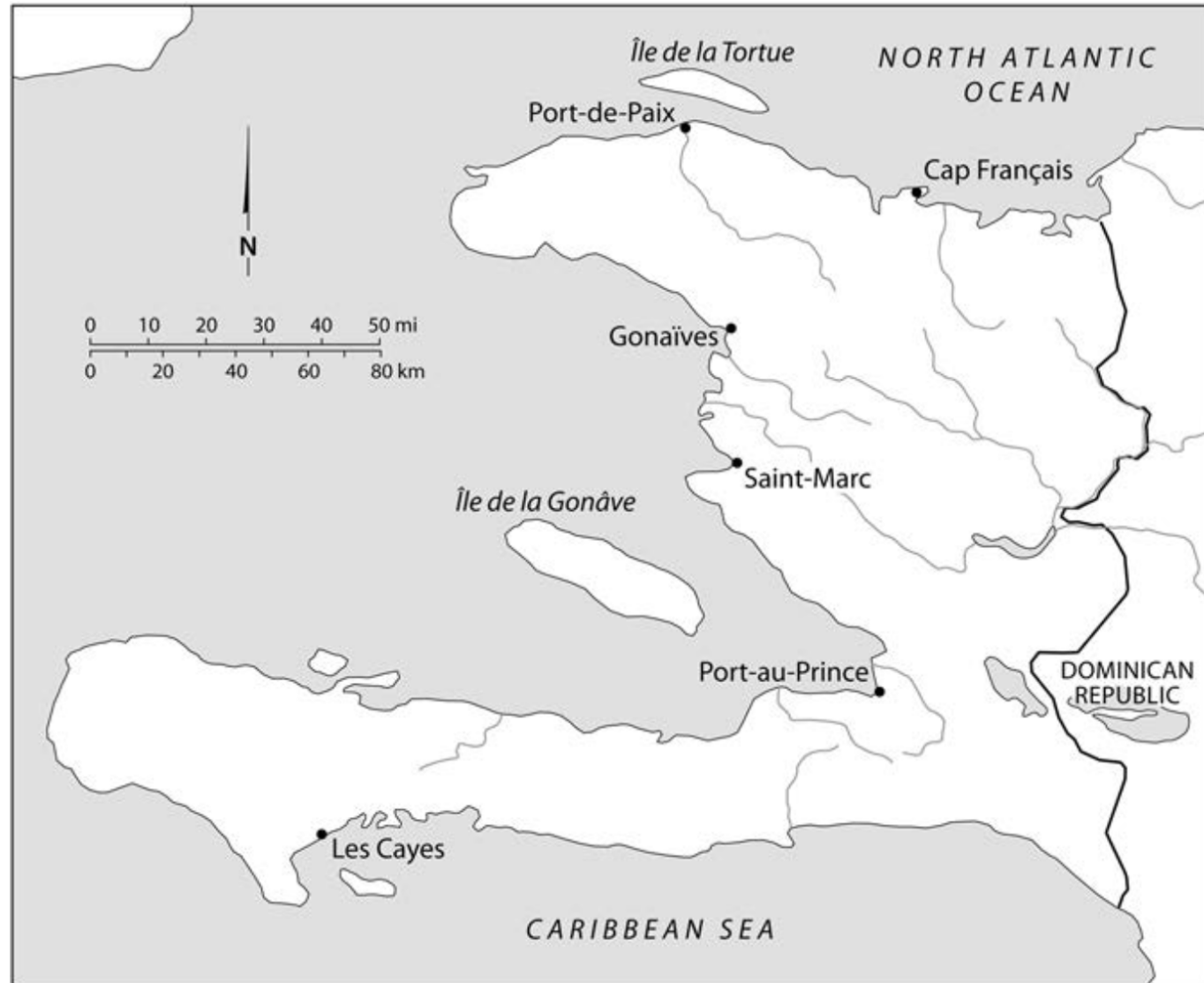


Figure 8.1. Haiti (at independence, 1804), where Napoleon's army was ravaged by the yellow fever epidemic of 1802–1803. (Map drawn by Bill Nelson.)

# Saint-Domingue

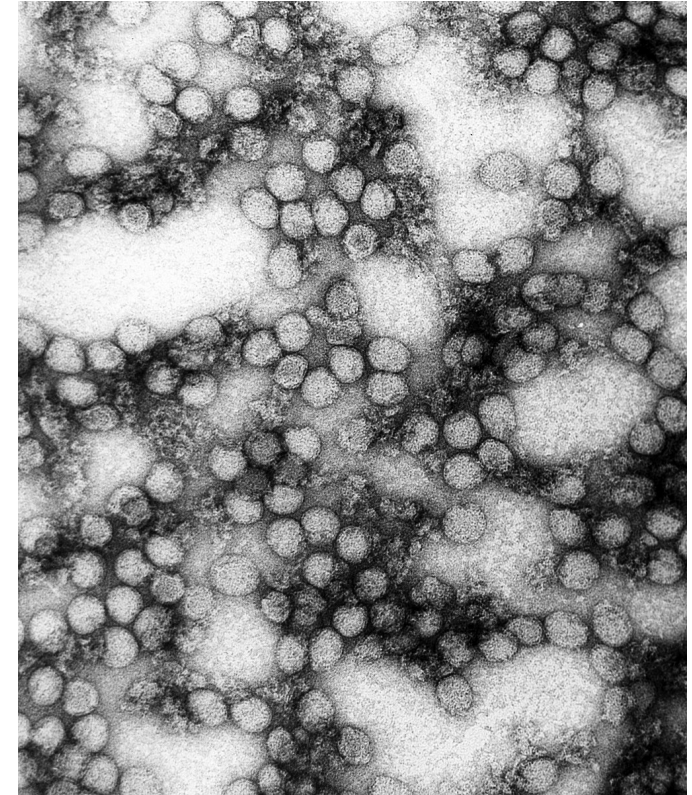
- Vital foundation of French wealth and economic growth
- 8000 plantations required a workforce of African slaves to produce sugar, coffee, cotton, tobacco, indigo, and cacao.
- Ship to Marseille, Nantes, and Bordeaux
- World's wealthiest colony – “*Paris of the Antilles*”

# *Explosive contradiction*

- An acre of land on a Saint-Domingue plantation yielded more wealth than an acre anywhere on earth
- Yet, can be said that it is the highest concentration of *human misery*
- Whipping, shackles, imprisonment, rape, and branding.
- It was more economical to replace slave than to provide humane living standards
- Absentee owners: managers focused on short-term profit over long-term stability – slaves would die 5 years after disembarking at le Cap

# “Bitter Sugar”

- Various names: *bronze john*, *black vomit*, *malignant fever*, *Siam sickness* & *yellow jack*
- First arrived from West and Central Africa through slave trade
- Carrier: *Aedes Aegypti*
- Slaves and mosquitoes were reservoirs — ships serving as super vectors, changing the history of west indies



# “Bitter Sugar”

- Sugar cultivation transformed Saint-Domingue’s ecology
- Created a paradise for microbes and *Aedes Aegypti* through many operations
  1. Forest clearing: reducing the number of birds that kept the mosquitoes in check

# “Bitter Sugar”

- Sugar cultivation transformed Saint-Domingue’s ecology
- Created a paradise for microbes and *Aedes Aegypti* through many operations
  1. Forest clearing: reducing the number of birds that kept the mosquitoes in check
  2. Deforestation: led to marshes
  3. Planting and cultivation of sugar: containers, cisterns, barrels, pots
  4. Estates: *Aedes Aegypti* only feed on human

# Slave's immunity

- Slaves of African birth are often immune to yellow fever
- Growth of the economy → supply of immunologically naïve Europeans
- Slaves often possessed a combination of acquired, crossover, and genetic immunity
  - Deugue fever → crossover resistance
  - Similar to cowpox → resistance to smallpox
- For Europeans, the Caribbean islands were notoriously unhealthy

*“Diseases, like vegetables, choose their own soil; as some plants like clay, others sand, other chalk, ‘so the yellow fever will not take root in a negro, nor the yaws in a white man”*

Robert Southey in 1850

# Slave's immunity

- This dictates how the economy is arranged in Saint-Domingue
- Import plantation labourers from Africa rather than relying on impoverished Europeans or Native Americans
- *Leading to social tensions that led to revolts*

# Social tensions

- Brutality → slave resistance
- Guillaume Raynal's "*new Spartacus*" or French abolitionist Comte de Mirabeau's "*volcano Vesuvius*"
- Individual insubordination, counterviolence, subversive ideas at masses, formation of "maroons", and collective actions
- Unlike the American south, plantation slaves of around 500,000 makes up the majority of Saint-Domingue's population
  - By the fall of the bastille in 1789, 700,000 slaves lived in the whole of united states
  - 500,000 in Saint-Domingue – the size of Massachusetts

# Social tensions

- Ideas spread easily since plantations were labour intensive
- Demography and work patterns therefore provided a potential for successful rebellion
- The majority of slaves had not been “*broken*”
  - Did not regard slavery as natural or permanent
  - Born in Africa and remembered life before servitude
- “Saint-Domingue had achieved an unhappy primacy as ‘the most extreme and concentrated slave system that had ever existed’”
- Stake choice: submission or rebellion

# Rebellion & Napoleon

# Significant events

- Revolution in France → Saint-Domingue being against “liberté, égalité, et fraternité”
- “*Declaration of the Rights of Man*” was incompatible with what was going on in Saint-Domingue
- Jacobins and the French Republic moved steadily for abolition
- “*Bois Coïman*”: famous meeting in the woods in Aug 1791 between slaves and maroons
  - Marched from plantation to plantation destroying machineries and plundering supplies

“Nothing of its like has ever threatened slavery in the Americas”

*“The insurgents were enormously diverse – women & men, African-born and creole, overseer and fieldworkers, slaves on mountain coffee plantations and sugar plantations ... Using violence against a violent system, they shattered the economy of one of the richest regions in the world. [...] Estimates of the numbers of insurgent varied widely, but by the end of September there were ... up to 80,000 in insurgent camps.”*

Laurent Lebois

# Napoleon's war to restore Slavery

- The only real hope of the planters was that the National Assembly in Paris would send troops
- Girondins and Jacobins, the two main factions, both believed in abolishing aristocracy in France
  - Implied abolishing “aristocracy of the skin”
- Decided that all slaves are French citizens and will enjoy all rights.
- *No provision to compensate slaveowners for their loss*

# A rightward swing to Napoleon

- July 27 1794 – revolt against the Reign of Terror
  - Downfall of Robespierre and the Jacobins
  - Abolitionists were ousted from power
- As First Consul, Napoleon viewed events in Saint-Domingue with dismay
- Ever restless to expand his dominion and to achieve lasting glory, he imagined a revived colonial role in the Americas
- He would fail...



# A contest of Slavery vs. Freedom?

- Louverture, the leader of the black rebellion, was a pragmatist who would have wanted a hybrid semifree plantation system.
- He was also a prosperous planter who resorted to owning slaves himself
- Manage a docile workforce. Blacks and coloured, although “free”, would be compelled (if necessary, by force) to toil for low wages under harsh discipline
- Priority: island’s productivity
- Black emancipation was not the goal of the Black Spartacus

# French Army destroyed by Yellow Fever

# The French army destroyed

Many reasons

1. Novelty of ex-slaves' style of war
  - Losing mean full annihilation
  - A war of extermination
2. No longer just slaves with no training
  - By 1802 when General Leclerc landed in Le Cap, things had changed
  - Knowledge of terrains and how to exploit them

# The French army destroyed

- Goal for Louverture: wait until summer rainy season
- Medical climatology of Saint-Domingue was key to his military strategy
  - Also knew that newly arrived Europeans will perish of the yellow fever
  - Time was on their side.
- The french knew, but underestimated
  - The Epidemic was very violent btw 1802-1803

# The french army destroyed

- Leclerc was incompetent: acquired his command by marriage to Napoleon's sister
- No colonial background and expected easy victory over the *nègres*.
- Did not expect “guerrilla warfare” which was coined a decade later in Spain
- Napoleon, being from Corsica, knew full well of insect-borne diseases in warm climates
  - But expected the fight to end much earlier than summer

# The French army destroyed

- The summer arrived, and Leclerc admitted failure and retired to Le Cap as soon as the first soldier fell ill.
- Turned to other coercive means of black population
  - Rapes and sexual violence played its part in Saint-Domingue history of relationships between European men and women of African-descent
- But soon the warmer and humid weather will take them

# The French army destroyed

- The french lacked all immunity
- Napoleon's army began to melt away as his troops begin to die in terrifying numbers
- Napoleon dispatched 65k in success waves
  - 50k-55k died
  - 35-45k died due to yellow fever (55-70%)

# The French army destroyed

- The virulence was extraordinary
- Two stages of yellow fever
  1. Chills and high fevers, headache, nausea and fatigue: recover after 3 days
  2. Several cases: full intensity attack – high temp and chills, black vomit, diarrhea, tormenting headache, yellow skin due to jaundice, hemorrhages from nose, mouth, and anus...
- CFR of 15-50%
- But btw 1802-1803, CFR of 70%...
- Why?

# Why such high CFR?

1. Mutation of the virus?
2. “Virgin soil epidemic”?
3. Age & gender
  - Flavivirus prefer robust young adults
  - And males due to sensors of *Aedes aegypti*
4. Exhausting physical toils

# The French army destroyed

- France lost 50,000 people
- Almost no French profited from the war to reimpose French rule and slavery in the Americas
- Napoleon concluded that the territories had become worthless
  - Moved to the east...
  - Overturning the British hegemony in India
  - Need to destroy Russia
  - The rest is the history, and that of dysentery and typhus