

A comparative study of the haitian and brazilian independence movements

[History](#)



Does a revolution require a violent mob or is it simply a declaration of independence? Literally, revolution means a fast change, which begs the question. "How fast is fast"? Some political revolutions have lasted for years and even decades, while others have occurred in the span of days. The most effective way to define a political revolution is to look at examples. History provides us with a plenty of cases; from the Bolsheviks in Russia and the Gandhians in India to the Reign of Terror in France and Sons of Liberty in the United States. Each movement was distinct and different, due to the unique circumstances of each nation and her people.

A study of Latin American revolutions easily demonstrates how the circumstances of the public effect the revolution itself. A comparative study of the Haitian and Brazilian independence movements allows for a thorough understanding of the true diversity of the independence movements of Latin America. The people of Haiti supported and inspired their revolution, while Brazil's independence was a result of a simple transfer of power from one authority to another. The difference between these two events is clearly demonstrated through an examination of the cause, method and results of these movements.

A key ingredient to any revolution is a cause. In order to have change, people need a reason for that change. The cause is the driving force, the reason and the purpose behind a revolution. When studying a political movement, it is essential to examine who the action benefited. Sometimes the cause is created by the public to benefit the people, but in other cases it is created by the elite to benefit themselves. While the revolt in Haiti seems

to demonstrate the former, Brazil clearly demonstrates the latter. When Napoleon invaded the Iberian Peninsula, the Portuguese royalty fled to Brazil. They established court in the capital city of Rio de Janeiro, and lived in Brazil for the duration of Napoleon's campaigns. Mabry writes " they made it their home, building expensive houses, investing money and enjoying the easy life". With the seat of government in Rio de Janeiro, many of the old restrictions on trade and commerce disappeared (Fitch). After Napoleon's defeat the Portuguese slowly regained control of their country. The Cortes, Portugal's elected legislative body, reassembled and demanded that the exiled monarchs return to Lisbon.

Upon his mother's death, King Joao VI returned to rule Portugal, but he left his son Pedro to govern as prince regent of Brazil. However, " the Cortes was determined to rule the empire from Lisbon and lower Brazil to the status of a colony" (Mabry). The Brazilian elite, who had grown accustomed to the equal treatment they had experienced when the court was in Rio de Janeiro, were appalled. Koreisha explains, " the Portuguese crown inadvertently readied the Brazilians for independence by elevating the colony to the status of a United Kingdom".

The elite greatly feared a loss of their power and reinstatement of Portuguese mercantile policy. So, although " most Brazilians favored remaining under Portugal's constitutional monarchy, the titled nobility, officeholders and merchants supported an absolute monarchy and an independent Braganca prince" (Mabry). The main cause and motivation behind the Brazilian independence movement was a desire to protect the power and economic

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interests of the wealthy elite. In a sharp contrast, the Haitian revolution was initiated and sustained by the slave population of the island.

French Saint-Domingue prided itself on being the richest colony in the world, but its vast wealth was only concentrated in the upper echelons of an extremely stratified society. One's quality of life in Saint-Domingue was largely determined by one's race and social status. " By 1789 Saint-Domingue's population consisted of about 450, 000 black slaves, 40, 000 whites, and 28, 000 free blacks and mulattoes" (Dauphin). There were even divisions among the wealthy whites " grand great blancs whites" and the middle class " petit small blancs whites".

The wealthy whites were allied with the mulattoes and free blacks, who together oppressed the thousands of black slaves. Baptist writes, " The slaves in Saint-Domingue suffered some of the worst conditions in the Caribbean. " They were abused and worked to death for the sugar plantation owners' lucrative benefit. Due to the fifteen to one ratio between slaves and owners, the owners thought it necessary to exercise an inordinate amount of control over the slaves' actions. Meetings of two or more slaves were forbidden, Voodoo and other African religions were banned.

More than owning their slaves, masters controlled every aspect of their lives. In spite of their seemingly hopeless situation; many slaves dreamed of freedom and revenge. Corbett stresses that " the slaves never willingly submitted to their status and were constantly fighting it". There were perpetual slave rebellions and maroons, groups of runaway slaves, constantly harassed plantation owners. Baptist writes, " the conditions were

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ripe for a revolution and the only thing lacking was an inciting incident". The French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen provided the necessary catalyst for action.

The French Enlightenment ideas inspired the slaves to fight for their own freedom. Knight explains their motivations, " they refused to settle for anything less than full freedom for themselves. When it became clear that their emancipation could not be sustained within the colonial political system, they attempted to create an independent state. " On the most fundamental level, the cause behind the Haitian independence movement was to free the enslaved population and create a equal society. In order to continue our study of these two revolutions, we must examine their very different mechanisms of obtaining their goals.

Why is it that Brazil experienced a seamless shift of power from Portuguese to native control, while the Haitians struggled through a bloody war? How did the slaves overthrow their oppressive society despite all odds? Most importantly, who were the men who led these nations through their transition from colony to nation. Brazil experienced a drastic political change almost overnight and many attribute the smooth transition to the expertise of Jose Bonifacio de Andrada e Silva. Andrada e Silva was an important and trusted advisor of Prince Pedro, and he was later elected prime minister of Brazil.

However, Andrada e Silva's greatest honor is to be known as the Patriarch of Independence. Koreisha calls him the mastermind behind Brazilian independence while Amaral writes " without Jose Bonifacio Brazil would not

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exist in its current form". He counseled the prince towards independence and was instrumental in independence negotiations with Portugal. Although Andrada e Silva was instrumental behind the scenes, the most famous moment of the Brazilian Independence movement was Dom Pedro I's Grito de Ypiranga. On September 7, 1822 Pedro announced, "Independencia o Morte (Independence or Death)".

Three months later he was crowned Emperor Pedro I. "While the Spanish viceroyalties in America had to fight fiercely for their independence, and still end up broken into 18 republics; Portugal and Brazil settled the matter by negotiation with Great Britain acting as broker" (Koreisha). This unprecedented peaceful negotiation of a new nation has never been replicated. Some find reason for the peaceful settlement in leadership; while others believe the settlement was a result of skillful negotiation. I feel that it can be traced back to the Brazilians' purpose of independence.

Under independence, Brazil would still remain a monarchy, and the Portuguese royals would still control the country. Essentially, the interests of an independent, elite controlled Brazil simply did not clash with those of the Portuguese royalty. On the other hand, the purpose of the Haitian Slave Revolt most definitely conflicted with the interests of France and the rest of the western world. "The Haitian revolution was entirely driven by the passions of men and women who had been enslaved all of their lives. They didn't simply desire liberty, they wanted vengeance" (Hooker).

The slaves wanted freedom and equal treatment; ideals which contradicted with the very fiber of European society. Arguably, this great divergence in <https://assignbuster.com/a-comparative-study-of-the-haitian-and-brazilian-independence-movements/>

beliefs and interests made Haiti's road to independence much longer than Brazil's. The slave rebellion launched in 1791 represented the culmination of a protracted conspiracy among black leaders (Country Study.) The revolution is thought to have originated from a Petwo Voodoo service conducted by an houngan named Georges Bissou.

A possessed woman is said to have named those who were to lead the slaves in a revolt. Word spread rapidly of this historic and prophetic event" (Corbett). Across the colony, slaves and maroons whispered about the prophesy and the dream of freedom. The slaves readied themselves for a major uprising and on the night of August 22, they attacked. " A wave of fire engulfed the colony, as thousands of slaves set fire to plantations, torched cities and massacred a terrified white population" (Thomson). Traditionally, this date is recognized as the start of the revolution. " The once rich colony was smoldering in ruins, slaves and maroons from across the land were hurrying to the banner of the revolution" (Corbett).

The white population was in disarray with no idea how to react or defend themselves from the angry mob. Then in a shocking turn of events, the free blacks of Port-au-Prince joined the whites in their attempt to put down the revolt. The events of Port-au-Prince inspired the Colonial Assembly, it decided to recognize the citizenship of all people, regardless of property or birth status. Corbett clarifies, " the battle lines were drawn, with all free people, regardless of color, on one side, and the black slaves and maroons on the other".

Toussaint Louverture, The Black Napoleon, was of great importance to the revolution. A former slave, he joined the revolution in 1793. His first move was to organize the slaves into an army. Louverture also realized that France, Spain and Great Britain all wanted Saint Domingue for themselves. Instead of attempting to fight all three European super powers with his small army, his great genius was to achieve what he wanted for the slaves by playing each of the European powers off each other" (Hooker).

Eventually, Louverture allied with the French upon the guarantee that all the slaves would be freed. Louverture realized that he had to maintain his pretense of an allegiance with France, in order to eventually succeed in gaining independence. He then proceeded to consolidate his power by eliminating internal rivals. Consequently, " he crowned himself governor general for life, much to the displeasure of Napoleon Bonaparte"(Knight). A free Saint-Domingue with Louverture at the helm, was not part of Bonaparte's plan for world domination.

In February of 1802 Napoleon asked his brother-in-law, General Charles Leclerc to put down the rebellion. Leclerc arrived in Saint-Domingue with the " intention of restoring it to its pre-Revolutionary colonial state," (Corbett). The French army was weakened by yellow fever and the slaves guerrilla war tactics were very effective, so in the end Leclerc resorted to deception. Louverture was summoned to a meeting with the French government, under an assurance of his safety. However, upon his arrival he was arrested and deported. Corbett exclaims, " So much for French honor! ".

The French had hoped that the capture of L'Overture would subdue the revolutionaries; instead it galvanized them into action as L'Overture gained the status of a martyr. Upon L'Overture's death in a French prison, Jean-Jacques Dessalines took on his leadership role. Dessalines was bitter and angry from his days as a slave and fought with shockingly brutal guerrilla war tactics. A desperate Leclerc and his successor Rochambeau, responded by executing blacks whenever and wherever they found them. In retribution, Dessalines declared that every European who did not support the revolution be executed.

Senseless murder and heartless killing were practiced by both sides, and "the slaughter perpetrated on non-combatants would not be equaled until World War II" (Hooker). The slaves' battle for an independent nation grew into a destructive and hateful racial war. Finally, on November 28 1803, Rochambeau surrendered to Dessalines and declared Saint Domingue a free and independent republic. A Haitian legend holds that their two colored flag was created when Dessalines removed the white from the French flag to represent a new nation without white influence.

After more than a decade of violence, the slaves of Saint-Domingue finally gained their freedom and a new nation. Dauphin explains, "upon independence the people changed the name of the colony from Saint-Domingue to the aboriginal name - Haiti". Clearly both Haiti and Brazil took very different courses to obtain their independence, one utilized negotiation and the other guerrilla warfare. In the end, both nations realized their goal of freedom. However, there were some very important differences between

these two new nations and their systems of government How did the slaves of Haiti deal with their new found independence?

Did the Brazilians simply resort to the Portuguese system or did they form their own? And the most important question, did the new leaders fulfill the goals and purpose of the revolution, or did they simply grow to be as corrupt as the governmental officials they replaced? . Brazil enjoyed a political stability that was unparalleled in the other Latin American nations. Mabry attributes the endurance of the government to the presence of the monarchy. " Royalty enjoyed a special place in people's thinking, a mystique".

The " mystique of royalty" also induced foreign powers to accept Brazil as a legitimate power. Burns explains, " By his birth and inheritance as well as through the concurrence of the Brazilian elite, Pedro's position and power were at once legitimate" (86). The emperor was surprisingly liberal, and breaking from the popular Divine Right mentality he authorized a constitution. He appointed a committee of ten Brazilians to write a new constitution and submitted it to local municipal councils for ratification (Burns, 86). The new government had four branches, executive, legislative, judiciary and moderative.

The moderative power quantified the emperor's influence, as it entrusted him with the responsibility to maintain independence and equilibrium of power between all the branches of local as well as national government. Although this document seems to concentrate most of the power in the emperor's hands, it was seen as a very liberal document at the time. Burns

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writes, " proof of the viability of the constitution lay in it's longevity; it lasted until the monarchy fell in 1899 and has proven to be both Brazil and Latin America's most durable constitution" (87).

Upon assuring the independence of Haiti, Dessalines proclaimed himself Emperor Jacques I. As Dessalines's only exposure to leadership was military he attempted to maintain a militaristic level of control over his people. Although independent Haiti abolished slavery, in an attempt to stimulate the economy Dessalines reestablished the plantation system. " Harsh measures bound laborers to their assigned work places, and penalties were imposed on runaways and on those who harbored them. (Country Study)".

Additionally, the emperor's court was wrought with corruption and scandal. Finally, mulattoes despised Dessalines for his race, his uneducated background and his corrupt government. Eventually, he was murdered in a plot supported by Alexandre Pétion, a mulatto leader. Under Dessalines the Haitian economy had made little progress despite the restoration of forced labor. Conflict between blacks and mulattoes ended the cooperation that the revolution had produced, and the brutality toward whites shocked foreign governments and isolated Haiti internationally.

The Brazilians created a constitutional monarchy very similar to the one present in Portugal before the revolution. By creating an independent Brazil, the elitist freed themselves from the chains of mercantilism, while still retaining the " benefits" of monarchy. They did not intend to aid the common man or the slave, and their new government did not attempt to do so. On the

other hand, the Haitian revolution was created with the spirit of " Liberty, Equality and Fraternity". However, the Haitians did not accomplish their goal.

Instead they replicated slavery with a forced labor system, degenerated into a chaotic civil war upon the assassination of their emperor and disgraced themselves internationally. Although Haiti has the distinction of being the first free black republic in the western hemisphere, it also has the unfortunate distinction of being the one of the most unsuccessful republics in the west. The Brazilian independence movement was created to benefit the elite, and it certainly did. However, the Haitian revolution designed to help the people ended being more detrimental than beneficial for the common good.