

WAIT, WAIT, DON'T GUILLOTINE ME!

Test – and refresh – your knowledge of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror with this simple multiple-choice quiz!

5. Partly as a consequence of the French Revolution, France abolished slavery in its colonies in:

- A. 1794
- B. 1802
- C. 1848

Answer: A & C. While Africans in America were still enduring the atrocities of slavery toward the end of the 18th century, France was embroiled in a revolution that would yield a most-shocking result: On February 4, 1794, the National Convention, the first elected Assembly of the First Republic (1792–1804), under the leadership of Maximilien Robespierre, abolished slavery in law in France and its colonies.

Although the slave trade benefited France greatly, slavery and the French Revolution became intertwined, with many prominent French citizens critical of the practice of keeping unpaid servants. At one point, 500,000 persons were enslaved in Saint Domingue (which would later be known as Haiti). Sugar, coffee and cotton plantations were staffed by Black and mixed-race workers who lived under a stiff set of rules known as the “Code Noir.”

With the Revolution underway, mixed-race free men of Saint Domingue began to speak out against the lack of rights that free Blacks held and took the matter to the National Assembly of France. Assembly members were divided, though, because some were members of abolitionist organization Society of the Friends of Blacks.

Still, while many ignored the call for abolishment, more than 28,000 free Black and mixed-race persons continued to fight for equal rights – with some owning slaves of their own. Many of these freedom fighters had supporters on the other side.

White French political activist and writer Olympe de Gouges was one of the more vocal abolitionists of her time and released a pamphlet titled “Reflections on Black People” in 1788, where she wrote the following:

Why are Black people enslaved? The color of people’s skin only suggests a slight difference. There is no discord between day and night, the sun and the moon and between the stars and dark sky. All is varied; it is the beauty of nature. Why destroy nature’s work?

White and mixed-race landowners alike had to quell the tensions of the free Blacks within the colonies. They were concerned that officials in Paris would strike down slavery and end their trade production. Vincent Ogé, an influential man of color, was responsible in leading a revolt in Saint Domingue in 1789, which was inspired by the lack of cooperation from White landowners to administer fair treatment.

Although he was successful in his initial attack, Ogé would later be publicly executed for the infraction. Still, slaves, with the help of free Blacks and other abolitionists, continued to hold uprisings. France responded by denying certain rights to Blacks in Saint Domingue’s colonies.

After years of fighting from the rebels, which halted the production of the crop hauls in Saint Domingue, the National Convention took a more radical approach than the National Assembly and voted in 1794 to abolish slavery in its colonies.

Some slave owners, both White and of color, were angered by the decree and left the island. Unfortunately, the law was more symbolic than anything, as landowners continued to enforce slavery and victimized anyone who sought to stand for their rights.



Ten years later in 1804, however, Saint Domingue would become the first country to record a successful slave revolt.

Although the French military leader Napoleon Bonaparte would reinstitute slavery in 1802 and attempt to seize Haiti back, he suffered defeat at the hands of revolutionary generals Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. France's failure to put down the revolt in Saint-Domingue prompted Napoleon to sell Louisiana to the United States 1803. Slavery was finally re-abolished in all French colonies in 1848.

Source: "France Abolishes Slavery on This Day In 1794, 71 Years Before America," by D.L. Chandler. February 4, 2013, *Newsone*.