

FRENCH COLONIZATION IN CUBA, 1791-1809

PERHAPS no event affected the lives of so many people and the history of so many nations as the French Revolution and subsequent roles played by Napoleon Bonapart. There was the Louisiana Purchase and the preliminaries to the War of 1812 in North America. In the Caribbean the Haitian independence movement which was precipitated by events in France set off a chain of events of far-reaching consequence. For Spanish America the Napoleonic invasion and occupation of Spain had a catalytic affect for the independence-minded patriots who declared themselves independent "in the name of Spanish Prince Ferdinand." The invasion of Portugal and the flight of the Court to Brazil set that country reeling on its course toward nationhood. This study begins with the earliest actions in the French colony of Saint Dominigue after the outbreak of the French Revolution.

Saint Domingue, as France called present-day Haiti, was the most prosperous colony in the world at the end of the 18th century. Sugar cane and coffee production—the basis of this prosperity—required large numbers of Africans which soon made the western half of the island black. Then came the French Revolution with its promises of equality. The Negroes agitated for the abolition of slavery and in 1793 the Jacobins of the First Republic conceded it. In the next few years they gained control of the entire island, framed a constitution, and proclaimed Haiti independent in 1801. In 1802 Napoleon sent General Leclerc to retake the island which figured in his plan for a French empire in the Mississippi Valley. A little over a year later the Haitian Republic, the first of Latin America, began its stormy existence.

The chaos of the period drove the white population to seek refuge primarily in neighboring Cuba, then a backward Spanish colony. This migration and its effect on Cuba is the theme of this study.

In 1791, the population of Cuba was about 270,000, according to the census taken by order of Governor Luís de las Casas.¹ However, Baron Humboldt, a visiting scientist in Cuba in 1804, felt that the 1791 census underestimated Cuba's population; he estimated that there were at least 362,000 adult inhabitants residing on the island.² Professor Johnson was also inclined to believe that the 1791 census was inaccurate. He stated:

¹ Willis F. Johnson, *The History of Cuba*, (New York, 1920), Vol. II, p. 279.

² *Ibid.*

“One of the best reasons for believing that this 1791 census does not tell the whole story is that the proportion of white persons to the black slaves was practically two to one, while [actually] . . . it was about one hundred to eighty-three . . .” By 1804, Johnson estimated, from the records of the militia and from the slaves employed on estates, Cuba’s population to be 432,080 of which 234,000 were whites, 90,000 were freedmen, and 180,000 were slaves.³ Although sources vary somewhat in statistics, they all agree that there was a sudden, rapid population increase in Cuba between 1791 and 1804.

Perhaps the most conspicuous aspect of these estimates is the increase in the white population, which indirectly resulted from the 1791 and 1801 uprisings on Santo Domingo. These uprisings served to temporarily stifle slave importations and to encourage Cubans to promote white immigration, as the increasing number of Negro slaves on Cuban plantations became a matter of considerable concern among Cubans. This concern over the increasing number of Africans in Cuba, and the possibility of an uprising, dated back to the 1740’s;⁴ however, it was only after the uprisings on Santo Domingo that the Cuban people began to really pressure plantation owners to substitute white immigrants for Negro slaves as laborers.⁵ As a result of the new interest in white immigration, the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País was created to encourage white immigration to Cuba, among other things.⁶ And on April 20, 1796, Governor Luís de las Casas convoked a meeting of the Real Consulado de la Habana or the Merchants’ Guild of Havana, also to consider methods of attracting white emigrants to Cuba.⁷ The efforts of these two organizations were not in vain, for within a short while thousands of white immigrants were to migrate to Cuba.

To consider the arrival of the French refugees from the island of Santo Domingo, one must begin in 1794. The Count of Casa Montalvo, while studying agricultural methods employed in the Caribbean, met French agricultural specialists at Jamaica, who had taken refuge there, and persuaded them to return with him to Cuba.⁸ In addition to

³ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

⁴ Heinrich E. Friedlaender, *Historia económica de Cuba*, (La Habana, 1944), p. 60.

⁵ Antonio L. Valverde y Maruri, *Discursos leídos en la recepción pública del doctor Antonio L. Valverde y Maruri en la noche de 28 de junio de 1923*, (La Habana, 1923), p. 38.

⁶ Ramón de la Sagra, *Historia económico-política y estadística de la isla de Cuba*, (La Habana, 1831), p. 9.

⁷ Juan M. Leiseca, *Historia de Cuba*, (La Habana, 1925), pp. 147, 148.

⁸ Francisco Pérez de la Riva, *El Café: Historia de su cultivo y explotación en Cuba*, (La Habana, 1944), p. 24.

these French, we know that a considerable number of others fled to Cuba prior to the second uprising in 1801,⁹ for in 1799, Don Salvador de Muro y Salazar, the Marquis of Someruelos and new governor of Cuba, granted land on the coast at Nipe, Holguín, Sagra de Tánamo, and Mayarí to recently-arrived white immigrants from Santo Domingo.¹⁰ By the time the second uprising broke out in 1801, Cuba was further prepared to receive as many as desired to migrate to her shores, for it was then that the French migrated in large numbers to Cuba. A few population statistics will suffice to illustrate the population increase. In 1791, before the French migrated to Cuba, the white population was approximately 133,559;¹¹ by 1804, Cuba's white population reached 234,000.¹² A considerable number of these were French from Louisiana after it was sold in 1803, which partly accounts for this increase.

The benefits of this industrious group, that was to furnish the colony with an inexhaustible supply of human resources and talent as agriculturalists, artists, financiers, artisans, and scientists, capable of constructing a new civilization in the New World, were quickly evidenced.¹³ Instead of remaining a burden on the Cuban economy, the French opened up new sources of wealth. Furthermore, once they had established themselves, they began to import, much to the dismay of many Cubans, Negro slaves to work their newly-cleared coffee, sugar, and cotton plantations.¹⁴ Taking advantage of the lack of interest in agriculture, the French also quickly acquired unoccupied ranches near the cities and converted them into productive plantations.¹⁵ They initiated many new, advanced practices which promoted the Cuban sugar industry, for French chemists had developed the highly perfected methods in sugar chemistry.¹⁶ Innovations were implemented at this time which continued to be used satisfactorily until the middle of the nineteenth

⁹ By 1801, General Aristizábal stated that he had admitted more than six hundred families at Havana that had been formerly known for their great wealth. José María Callejas, *Historia de Santiago de Cuba*, (La Habana, 1911), p. 65.

¹⁰ Sagra, *loc. cit.*

¹¹ Leiseca, *loc. cit.*; as it has been previously inferred, the exactness of the 1791 census has been questioned by several authorities.

¹² Callejas, *loc. cit.* In the year 1803 alone, twenty-seven thousand French had sought refuge in Cuba.

¹³ Pérez de la Riva, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

¹⁴ José Jauricio Quintero y Almeyda, *Apuntes para la historia de la isla de Cuba con relación a la ciudad de Matanzas desde el año de 1693 hasta el de 1877*. (Matanzas, 1878), p. 165.

¹⁵ Hubert H. S. Aimes, *A History of Slavery in Cuba, 1511 to 1868*, (New York and London, 1907), p. 57.

¹⁶ Pérez de la Riva, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

century.¹⁷ The benefits accrued from the industry of the French at Santiago were evident by 1807, when Colonel Sebastián Kindelán reported that twenty water-driven sugar mills and fourteen horse and ox-driven sugar mills had been built, and nine water-driven mills were remodeled between 1790 and 1807.¹⁸

However, while sugar production required elaborate machinery, extensive lands and a good labor supply, coffee was less industrialized, required less rapid harvesting, and therefore permitted a destitute group such as the French to take advantage of its opportunities.

The coffee industry brought a new source of wealth to Cuba, for coffee production, prior to the arrival of the French, had never surpassed eight thousand *arrobos* annually. However, two years after their arrival more than eighty thousand *arrobos* were being produced annually, and in the following years, according to Pezuela, coffee production surpassed three hundred thousand *arrobos* annually.¹⁹ In 1804, Sebastián de Kindelán, in charge at Santiago, informed the Real Consulado de la Habana that in that year alone, fifty-six *cafetales* or coffee estates had been established and more than five hundred thousand coffee bushes planted.²⁰

All went well in Cuba until a rumor, that Napoleon had invaded Spain, reached Havana in the middle of July of 1808.²¹ The rumor seemed so incredible that many refused to believe it until at last, on the evening of August 2, 1808, official news arrived at Santiago that Spain was at war with France.²² In the succeeding months relations between the French and the Cubans worsened. In view of their increasing unpopularity, some French "sold" what they could to friends, while others left everything and fled to the nearest fort to avoid personal violence. Quickly taking advantage of the opportunity, covetous Cubans auctioned off the property of the latter group. When it became evident that they could no longer remain in Cuba, an exceedingly large number of French left for New Orleans.²³

¹⁷ Julio J. de Riverend Brusone *et al.*, *Historia de la nación Cubana*, (La Habana, 1952), Vol. III, p. 187.

¹⁸ Jacobo de la Pezuela y Lobo, *Diccionario geográfico, estadístico, histórico de la isla de Cuba*, (Madrid, 1863), Vol. I, p. 57.

¹⁹ Alexander Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba*, (New York, 1856), p. 256.

²⁰ Francisco J. Ponte-Dominguez, *La huella francesa en la historia política de Cuba*, (La Habana, 1948), p. 51.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Callejas, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

²³ Charles Gayarré, *History of Louisiana*, (New Orleans, 1885), Vol. IV, p. 212.

In March of 1809, a decree finally arrived from the provisional government of Spain, ordering all foreigners expelled from Cuba.²⁴ In compliance, Someruelos notified the remaining French that they could not remain on the island.²⁵ Between May and July of 1809, thirty-four vessels, with at least six thousand French aboard, sailed for New Orleans,²⁶ from the island that had welcomed the French less than twenty years previously.²⁷ Once more Cuba was reduced to her former lethargic economic condition, temporarily without adequate agricultural leadership.

From this series of events we can conclude several things: First, occurrences in the mother country continued to determine the number of options open to the French refugees. They could not initially migrate to English Jamaica when violence erupted on Saint Domingue because France and England were enemies. Again after France and Spain became enemies Cuba ceased to be hospitable. Secondly, economically backward Cuba owed her 19th century prosperity to French capital and technology. Technology *is* exportable under certain conditions. Thirdly, despite the fact that black Saint Domingue had expelled the French emigrants and slaughtered many of their friends and relatives, African importations continued to be the solution to labor problems. Instead of recognizing the real problem, the slaveholders and legislators merely prohibited the importation of West Indian Negroes who might have participated in the Saint Domingue uprising. Governor William C. C. Claiborne in his correspondence with James Madison mentioned frequent complaints against him for restraining the African trade. Finally, perhaps because there was no other place to turn, the United States became at this very early date a haven for oppressed peoples.

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²⁴ Herminio Portell Vilá, *Historia de Cuba*, (La Habana, 1938), p. 151.

²⁵ Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 304, 305.

²⁶ George W. Cable, *The Creoles of Louisiana*, (New York, 1889), p. 156.

²⁷ Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 304.