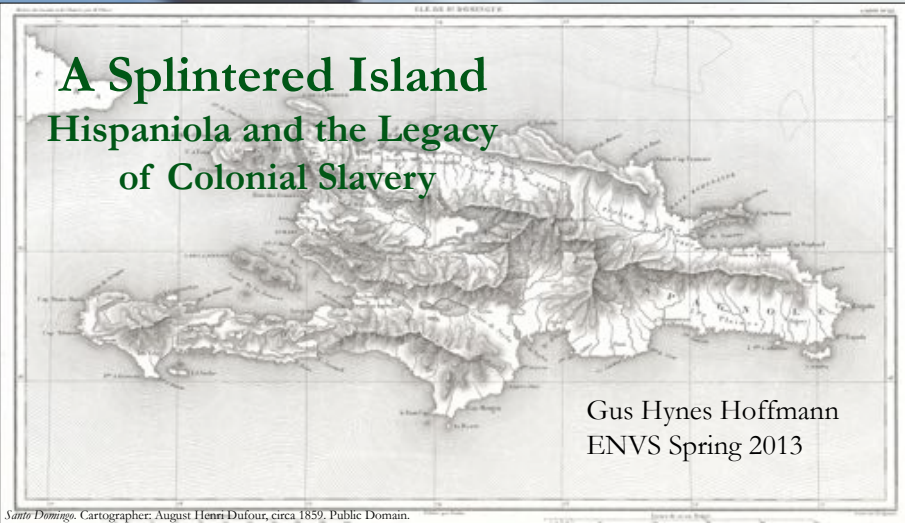


A Splintered Island

Hispaniola and the Legacy of Colonial Slavery



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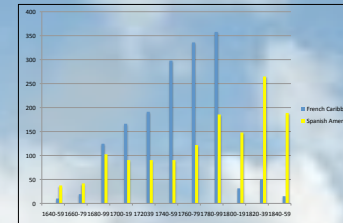
Santo Domingo. Cartographer: August Henri Dufour, circa 1859. Public Domain.

Introduction

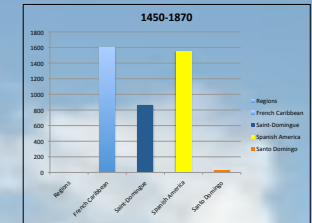
The island of Hispaniola is in the northern part of the Caribbean Sea, just to the east of Cuba and west of Puerto Rico. It is a relatively large, mountainous island, with a land area that measures slightly less than 76,200 square kilometers. Roughly two-thirds of that area is the Dominican Republic and the remaining third, on the western portion of the island, is Haiti.

The political, social, economic, and environmental situations in the Island's two constituent countries present a striking contrast. Historical analysis of developmental trends in Haiti and the Dominican Republic reveals that several factors have contributed to the contrasting levels of environmental degradation in the two countries.

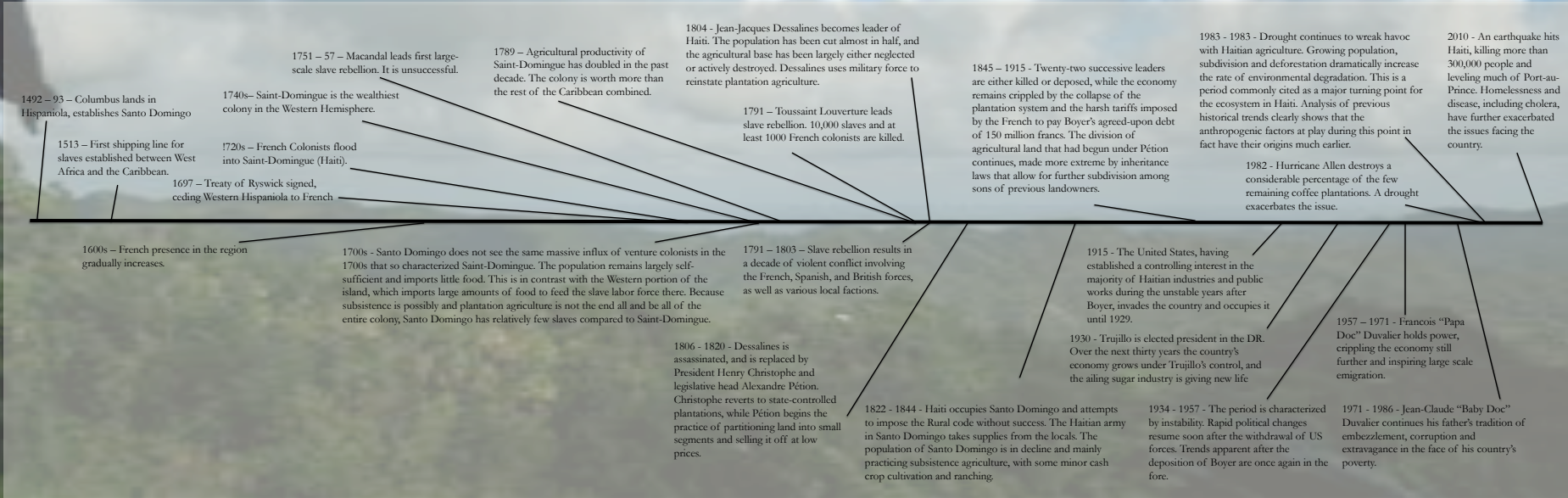
Haiti's predominantly slave population and the adoption of small-scale subsistence agriculture by the majority of the populace led to an otherwise disproportionate level of deforestation and environmental degradation.



Estimated Slave Imports (in 1000s)



Total Estimated Slave Imports (in 1000s)



Environmental Impact

The majority of the land under cultivation in Haiti is extremely steep and not suitable for intensive use. Thus, soil erosion is a massive concern. As the cultivated land degrades it is often left fallow or abandoned entirely, and new land must be cleared for subsistence use. Sedimentation from erosion has wreaked havoc on the patterns of surface water flow and storage, further damaging the agricultural productivity of the land. With less than two percent of the country remaining forested and the population still increasing, the issues are only growing more extreme.

In the Dominican Republic a slowly growing population and developing industrial base followed the gradual decline of the plantation system. With more land to utilize, a lower population density, and the lack of rampant agricultural subdivision, the human impact has not devastated the ecosystem to the same extent as Haiti. Soil degradation and deforestation are present, but fully 30% of the country remains forested, and the areas under the heaviest cultivation are relatively flat plains in the south of the country.

Future directions

Haiti is careening toward complete ecological collapse, and various reforestation efforts seem unlikely to reverse the course of the destruction without massive international aid. Given Haiti's lack of significance on a global scale, such aid seems equally unlikely. Efforts to improve farming techniques in the country would be of some benefit, but have proven difficult to implement.

The Dominican Republic still has a functioning ecosystem and some stretches of relatively unscathed forestland. However, a growing population continues to put pressure on the environment and deforestation is increasing, not decreasing. Similarities in climate and terrain between the two countries suggest that deforestation of land in the Dominican Republic will have a similar result to such deforestation in Haiti, albeit tempered somewhat by the subsequent patterns of land use in those deforested areas. A high priority placed on preservation and reforestation will be necessary to prevent such destruction from gaining unstoppable momentum.

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