Late in 1801, Napoleon sent his brother-in-law, General Victor-Emmanuel LeClerc and 20,000 troops to seize the island [Saint Domingue] and put an end to L'Ouverture… The French forces under LeClerc were the most capable [soldiers] the rebels had ever faced. After a few short, bloody battles, the French controlled most of the island. LeClerc was certain that total victory was his, as soon as reinforcements arrived (Parkinson, 1978).

But LeClerc was troubled because many of his soldiers were becoming sick with a high fever. He expressed his concern to Napoleon, writing, “I have 600 men on my sick list.” A week later, he noted, “I have already 1,200 in hospital” (Parkinson, 1978). It would only get worse. In late March, LeClerc was still fighting L’Ouverture’s forces. And in April the rains came, and with the rains came yellow fever.

Yellow fever is caused by a virus and is spread by mosquito… The disease, which originated in Africa and spread to the New World during the slave trade in the 1500s, affects humans as well as monkeys. Typically, yellow fever is expressed within one week of infection. If the French soldier was lucky, mild symptoms lasting less than one week would be experienced. These symptoms included headaches, fever, muscular pains, and nausea. However, most of the soldiers suffered severe manifestations of the disease. These symptoms included dangerously high fevers, severe headaches, muscular pains, jaundice, and vomiting (characterized by black material and fluid). If the soldier survived, a long period of recovery was required. In the Haitian expedition, yellow fever typically led to delirium, coma, and death.

Yellow fever ravaged Europeans in the New World well before it struck Napoleon's forces in 1802. According to Howard and Buckley, “The West Indies was, quite simply, a deathtrap for whites without immunity to yellow fever” (Howard & Buckley, 1985). The British were repeatedly stung by the disease in the Caribbean and South America. In 1741, during an expedition to capture Peru and Mexico, British forces were reduced from 27,000 to 7,000 by the dreaded disease they called the “black vomit.” Coastal towns and hamlets in the United States were particularly vulnerable to the disease in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Even as late as 1878, a yellow fever epidemic struck more than 100 United States towns, killing at least 20,000 people.

By the end of April, the disease was ravaging the French. LeClerc had lost one-third of his original force to yellow fever, one of the deadliest epidemics the colony had ever known. He wrote to Napoleon:

“A man cannot work hard here without risking his life and it is quite impossible for me to remain here for more than six months... my health is so wretched that I would consider myself lucky if I could last for that time...” (Parkinson, 1978).

By June, the French were dying at a rate of 30 to 50 per day. LeClerc was desperate for some measure of success. The rebel menace continued to fight and his forces were in wretched shape. L'Ouverture saw an opportunity to negotiate with the French… L'Ouverture accepted a meeting… but the French general Brunet had him arrested and placed on a French ship. LeClerc sent L'Ouverture to France where he later died in the confines of a desolate prison in 1803.
The rebels, now led by Dessalines, resumed hostilities against the French. Without a doubt, they were encouraged by the effects of yellow fever on the Europeans. Yellow fever was killing four-fifths of LeClerc's soldiers. Additionally, France had reopened the slave trade, which gave the entire black populace a clear reason to unite and drive out the French (Fick, 1990).

LeClerc's fate mirrored that of so many of his comrades; he succumbed to yellow fever on October 22, 1802. He was replaced by the General Rochambeau, who also could not prevent yellow fever from taking its toll. The disease consumed 20,000 additional reinforcements and Rochambeau surrendered in November, 1803. Haiti declared its independence in 1804, becoming the first independent nation in Latin America.

The effect of yellow fever on the French was staggering. Only approximately 3,000 men returned to France. Although estimates vary considerably, as many as 50,000 soldiers, officers, doctors, and sailors may have died from yellow fever. Before reinforcements arrived, LeClerc's original force of 20,000 was reduced to only a few thousand…

Napoleon's largest expeditionary force was thoroughly destroyed…

**Causes of the Epidemic:** Why did yellow fever decimate the French so thoroughly? **First,** the biological environment was ideal for a yellow fever epidemic. The French had never been exposed to yellow fever. Therefore, they represented a virgin population for the disease and were predisposed to acquiring the disease. The indigenous people represented the reservoir for the disease, but were somewhat resistant to its effects because of repeated exposure…

**Second,** the physical environment also was favorable for an epidemic. Spring rains provided ample mosquito breeding sites… Many of the island’s port towns (such as Port-au-Prince) were surrounded by swamps. Further, the hot and humid conditions stressed the French from the moment they left their ships.

**Third,** as is common in war, the social environment was favorable for the outbreak of disease. As the insurgency progressed, most of the principal cities were burned. The French were unable to use the valuable resources that these towns could have provided: medical supplies, clothing, and shoes (Fick, 1990). Napoleon prevented LeClerc from posting his troops in the mountains after his initial successes in controlling the port towns. Instead, the bulk of the army was stationed in the low lying region of Haiti, the areas where the mosquito population thrived. It was long known that mortality from yellow fever and malaria in the Caribbean could be substantially reduced by moving into the mountains (Howard & Buckley, 1985)…

---

**Cited References [For this excerpt]:**

