

"Sèl lang ki simante tout Ayisyen ansanm, se lang kreyòl.... Kreyòl ak franse se lang ofisyèl Repiblik Dayiti."

"Only one language unites all Haitians—it is the Kreyol language.... Kreyol and French are the official languages of Haiti."

KONSTITISYON REPIBLIK DAYITI (HAITIAN CONSTITUTION), 1987, CH. I, ART. 5.

See also Creole Languages of the Americas

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MARC E. PROU (2005)

HAITIAN REVOLUTION

This entry consists of two distinct articles. The first provides an overview of the Haitian Revolution and the second focuses on the reaction to the revolution in the United States.

OVERVIEW

Laennec Hurbon

AMERICAN REACTION TO THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

James Alexander Dun

OVERVIEW

Haiti is the ancient Taino name for the Caribbean island that was first named St. Domingue by the French after the 1697 Treaty of Ryswick granting Spain the western portion of the island. It was Jean-Jacques Dessalines, commander in chief of the victorious army against the French expeditionary forces (1802–1804), who chose the name of Haiti for St. Domingue. He wanted to consign to oblivion the French colonial domination of the island. The series of events that unfolded in St. Domingue were new and unprecedented, and they constituted, after the French Revolution of 1789 and the American Revolution of 1776, a third revolution that had immense implications for the countries still under the yoke of slavery and colonialism. However, it seems that history books have done everything possible to underestimate and obscure the fact that this transition from St. Domingue to Haiti was indeed an authentic revolution. What did it consist of exactly? What was at stake in the struggle undertaken to reach the creation of an independent nation? What are the explanations for the causes of this independence of 1804? Why can historians and why should historians state that it was about a revolution that had its own specificity, originality, and orientations?

To address these questions, one must first attempt to review the situation in St. Domingue from 1789 to 1804 and the different strategies put in place by the actors.

THE GENERAL SLAVE INSURRECTION OF AUGUST 1791: ITS FACTORS AND ITS STAKES

On the eve of 1789, St. Domingue was the most prosperous French colony, furnishing 70 percent of the revenue that France obtained from the totality of its possessions in the New World. One in eight French people lived off St. Domingue, from which fifteen hundred boats departed each year, loaded with 200,000 tons of sugar, coffee, and indigo. From just 1785 to 1789, 150,000 slaves were imported from Africa, with 55,000 slaves imported in one year alone, 1789. This clearly demonstrates that the system of slavery already begun two centuries before on the island was implacable and in full force near the end of the eighteenth century. The slaves numbered approximately 400,000 in contrast to 35,000 whites and 50,000 freed people (mulattos and blacks). One must be careful, however, not to see things in black and white, since among the slaves, there were mulattos, even if they were small in number, and among the freed slaves there were slave owners. Thirteen thousand men served in militias to prevent sabotage on sugar plantations, slave rebellions, and the

running away of slaves. The Black Codes, instituted in 1685 to prevent the crossing of these racial lines, strictly enforced relations among the three large social groups.

News of the storming of the Bastille and the declaration that "all men are born free and equal in rights" created immediate panic among St. Domingue's colonists, especially its merchants and administrators. For them, the best way of safeguarding the institution of slavery was to regain autonomy for St. Domingue, thus ending the practice of trading exclusively with metropolitan France. Above all, they sought to prevent the freed mulattos from exercising their civil rights. In the midst of this maneuvering by the whites (planters, managers, artisans, traders, and civil servants), came the news that on March 8, 1790, a decree issued in France proclaimed the right of all individuals age twenty-five and older to French citizenship. This victory for the free people of color suddenly created a giant rift in the institution of slavery. The white colonists did their best to avoid the implementation of this decree, which could pave the way for demands for freedom by the slaves. Faced with the refusal of the colonial administration to directly implement the decree, one of the mulatto leaders, Vincent Ogé, who had recently spent a year in France and who would thus have been in contact with the Society of the Friends of Blacks, disembarked in the colony with weapons and ammunition to free the enslaved mulattos. But he was captured, tortured, and executed. Some of his companions succeeded in fleeing to the western part of the island.

Would the slaves stand by passively watching as conflict developed between the white colonists and the freed mulattos? Since their arrival in the colony, slaves had been in search of freedom, running away to escape their masters, and they were waiting for a propitious moment to organize a general uprising and put an end to the system of slavery. Vodou was practiced among the slaves: It was an inherited system of belief from Africa integrating the traditions of diverse ethnic groups represented on the colony. In one of their vodou ceremonies, the slaves swore to put an end to slavery. It was during the night of August 22–23, 1791, that a general slave insurrection in the north of the country exploded, with disastrous repercussions: numerous fatalities among the colonists and the torching of 161 sugarcane refineries and 1,200 coffee plantations, with damage estimated at 600 million pounds.

The first accounts of the insurrection emphasized the element of surprise and the influence of exterior forces on the society of St. Domingue; the slaves were never presented as having made the deliberate choice of freedom by and for themselves. The colonists sought to ensure the failure of the insurrection by requesting widespread assis-

tance from abroad. Those who fled after the insurrection and who sought refuge in Philadelphia spread the idea that barbarism was rampant in St. Domingue and that it was essential to avoid the radicalism of emancipation by planning for a gradual abolition. All of the slave powers (Holland, Spain, Portugal, England, and the United States) wanted to ensure that a similar insurrection did not happen in their colonies.

The factors that led to the insurrection have been the object of endless questioning. Certain reports mention the influence of the Society of the Friends of Blacks; others declare that the word "revolution" was already on everyone's lips. The first factor was most certainly the condition of life for the slaves. The text of the royal edicts of 1685, known as the Code Noir, or the slave code, regulated daily life and demanded the absolute obedience of slaves to their masters. Laws were futile in limiting the power of the masters; they did not permit slaves to lodge any complaints against their masters. A number of slaves died of starvation or of the harsh conditions where they worked, on the plantation or in some cases in the household. As for the female slaves, they were routinely raped or in any case lived in constant fear of rape, since by definition to be a slave meant to be the property of one's master. It was under these conditions, and the permanent threat of the whip brandished by the overseer, that the slaves worked. Those who escaped and became fugitives were severely punished and submitted to various tortures (feet chained, mutilations, arms hacked off), and these tortures could lead to the death of the slave with no consequences for the masters. In short, daily life for the slaves was akin to the experience of a concentration camp. One can understand why the occasion for an insurrection was therefore particularly waited for and sought out. Vodou was a religion practiced far from the masters' eyes as a veritable system of mutual recognition that favored the collective conscience and a sense of solidarity. In fact, it was a religious leader, Boukman, who led the insurrection and who had recourse to the blood oath made to the gods to keep the plans completely secret. This pact was a tradition among the Ewe, the Adja, the Mahi, and the Fon of Dahomey (contemporary Benin).

Although Catholic missionaries were used to control the slaves by justifying the institution of slavery itself—all slaves had to be baptized upon the arrival of the Church—there were several priests who sided with the insurgent slaves and who acted on their behalf in negotiations with the colonists. All things considered, vodou and the Catholic Church, as well as the rumors about the rights of man, played a role in serving as a catalyst for the slave insurrection.

But what allowed the insurrection to achieve its full significance was the fighting led by Toussaint-Louverture, former slave and coachman on the Breda plantation in the north. He knew how to ally himself very early on with the leaders of the insurrection and worked to make the suppression of slavery decided by the slaves irreversible by putting into practice the principles of equality and freedom affirmed in the declaration of the rights of man: "Brothers and friends," he said. "I am Toussaint-Louverture, my name is perhaps known among you. I have undertaken to avenge myself. I want freedom and equality to reign in St. Domingue. I will work to realize this. Let us unite, brothers, and join us in fighting for the same cause." (Letter of Toussaint-Louverture, National Library of Paris, cited by James, 1938, p. 109).

TOUSSAINT-LOUVERTURE AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF AN INDEPENDENT HAITIAN NATION

A review of the essential stages of the politics conducted by Toussaint-Louverture reveals the following: He patiently constructed his own army, allied himself when necessary with Spain, then with England, and imposed himself as the incontestable leader of the various groups and factions struggling in the colony. When the colonists joyously greeted the British from Jamaica who would support the system of slavery shaken by the insurrection, Toussaint chose to fight with the French, and he rejoined their side. He was backed by the new assembly in France, the National Convention, which ratified the abolition of slavery on February 4, 1794, already proclaimed by decree in 1793 by its high commissioner, Sonthonax. Appointed commander in chief of the army in St. Domingue, Toussaint instilled discipline among his troops of fugitive slaves. In 1801 he succeeded in placing the entire colony under his command and triumphantly entered Santo Domingo, capital of the western region of the island no longer under Spain's control, and proclaimed the emancipation of the slaves. Toussaint effectively functioned as if the island were already independent. He reorganized the government administration and the judiciary, abolished useless taxes, created regulations against smuggling, and strove to convince former slaves to return to work. Finally, he took the risk of establishing the Constituent Assembly, therefore laying the foundation for an independent nation. This is the meaning of the 1801 constitution, cornerstone of the nation, even if the texts declare that St. Domingue remained associated with France. One of the founding principles of this constitution was thus articulated: "In this land, slaves cannot exist, slavery is forever abolished."



Toussaint-Louverture, leader of the Haitian Revolution.
PHOTOGRAPHS AND PRINTS DIVISION, SCHOMBURG CENTER
FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE, THE NEW YORK PUBLIC
LIBRARY, ASTOR, LENOX AND TILDEN FOUNDATIONS.

It was the expedition of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802 to reinstate slavery on the island that hastened the brutal rupture with France, for Toussaint-Louverture's plan had been to establish a nation associated with France in a sort of commonwealth before the fact. However, Napoleon would resort to all the schemas and codes of a racist ideology and assemble one of the largest armadas of that epoch (eighty-six battleships and 35,000 soldiers) to regain control of St. Domingue and deport Toussaint-Louverture to France with his generals. The determination of the former slaves and the subordinate officers made the task impossible for the head of the expedition, General Leclerc. With Toussaint arrested and deported to the Fort de Joux in France, the war ran its course. News of the reinstatement of slavery in Guadeloupe, known in St. Domingue thanks to the slaves who accompanied the French troops and who escaped from the warships, had the effect of fomenting insurrection among all of the soldiers and the masses of farmers. Finally, in the course of a victorious battle, the new Haitian flag was raised on May 18, 1803. Jean-Jacques

Dessalines, new chief of the army following the arrest of Toussaint, announced to Thomas Jefferson in the United States that Haiti would be proclaimed independent on January 1, 1804.

THE REPERCUSSIONS OF THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

The events in St. Domingue had an influence that one must learn to decipher, even two hundred years later. In the quest to comprehend the repercussions of the successful slave insurrection of St. Domingue on the slave colonies of the Caribbean, one realizes that this was a revolution that concerned the destiny of all the black communities of the Americas, the African diaspora, and Africa itself.

News of the insurrection of 1791 and Haitian independence reached the slave colonies, unleashing various revolts and insurrections. Even if it had been difficult to assist Guadeloupe and Martinique, one must note that the constitution of 1805 stipulated that all slaves who arrived in Haiti became free and Haitian and that "Haitians will from now on only be known under one designation, Black." On the one hand, Haiti was considered a welcoming nation for all of the fugitive slaves of the Caribbean; on the other, the appellation of black was rehabilitated, an appellation that slavery had transformed into a stigma and a mark of barbarism. One must suppose that a fear of contagion provoked by the Haitian Revolution dominated the minds of colonial administrators in Guadeloupe and Martinique. Dessalines himself believed he had to organize an expedition in February 1805 to Santo Domingo to pursue the occupation that Toussaint had undertaken because the French forces stationed in the east of the island represented a danger to the independence of Haiti. The suppression of slavery in the east had therefore to be consolidated by a Haitian occupation; this was the motive offered by the new Haitian government.

Yet it was Spanish America, above all, that was most directly influenced by the Haitian Revolution in its quest for independence. In 1806 Francisco de Miranda departed from the southern Haitian town of Jacmel with significant aid for Venezuela, where he hoped to foment an insurrection and proclaim independence. At the time, however, he claimed to be mobilizing a nonviolent political movement that would not follow the model of the Haitian Revolution. Later, with Simón Bolívar, he made an appeal to five hundred Haitians and about a thousand slaves to join the Venezuelan army, but the problem of the abolition of black slavery, which was rife in South America, did not appear to be a preoccupation. In 1815 Bolívar again obtained assistance and asylum in Haiti on the southern coast, in

the town of Les Cayes. President Alexandre Pétion received him on January 2, 1816, and assured him he would receive support in weapons, soldiers, and money. It was from the port of Les Cayes that Bolívar departed with six hundred refugees to undertake a new stage in the liberation of Spanish America. Pétion, in return, solicited from Bolívar the proclamation of the abolition of slavery in the countries of the continent that were liberated. On June 3, 1816, Bolívar honored the promise made to Pétion and proclaimed the abolition of slavery under the principle of equality among all men.

Research on the repercussions of the Haitian Revolution still needs to be undertaken with greater precision. In fact, Great Britain did not delay in proclaiming the abolition of slavery in its colonies (Barbados, Jamaica, and others) and all participation in the slave trade under punishment of death, by parliamentary decree in 1827. In 1814 Holland prohibited the slave trade. At any rate, the colonists from other countries in the Caribbean were henceforth on the defensive.

In the United States, news of the Haitian antislavery revolution was met with a guarded reception. The American government did not recognize Haiti's independence before 1862, that is, before the end of the Civil War, so that the black slaves of the South would not be tempted into a violent revolution for an immediate abolition of slavery. However, the trade that had flourished under the government of Toussaint-Louverture between 1794 and 1802 was pursued without interruption. The United States understood that the failure of General Leclerc's expedition to St. Domingue would benefit them both in political and economic terms. Bonaparte's ambitions for Louisiana to help realize his dream of a colonial project that would dominate the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico represented an obstacle to American expansionism. This obstacle was soon discarded; with the loss of the colony of St. Domingue, Bonaparte had to renounce Louisiana. On the other hand, among black Americans freed and enslaved, Toussaint-Louverture became a historical figure, and the news of Haitian independence sustained the vision of black self-determination and the possibility of vanquishing racist ideology.

THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION: A TURNING POINT IN THE HISTORY OF HUMANITY

While it is closely linked to the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution retains its own specificity. The problem of the application of the principles articulated in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen arises principally from the notion of "man." The dominant mentality in France and among the majority of the revolu-

tionaries of the eighteenth century led to an understanding of human rights based on parameters from the culture of the West (language, religion, and race). Thus, there was considerable delay in the recognition of blacks as whole human beings to whom one can apply the principles of freedom and equality. There was the problem of anthropology, which seems to be the principal obstacle for the abolition of black slavery, as if blacks were not yet ready to enjoy the rights of humanity. Even so, the insurrection of St. Domingue on August 23 and the success of the Haitian Revolution in 1804 was a magnificent demonstration of just how much the slaves were attached to those very principles of freedom and equality. Abolition was not something that was to be granted by others; the process of emancipation was deliberated and organized by the slaves themselves. This was the first such emancipation to succeed in history, and it attests to the fact that there are no human beings who can be classified as less than human on the basis of a racial hierarchy of cultures. For this reason, the Haitian Revolution had far-reaching consequences for its resolutely antiracist, antislavery, and anti-colonialist orientation. It was a watershed in the history of human rights and freedom, and it ushered in a new era. Wherever racial ideology is still rampant, wherever the independence of nations in the region is menaced by superpowers bent on political domination just as in the days of slavery, wherever dictatorship reigns, there the memory of the Haitian Revolution must be revived.

See also Black Codes; Dessalines, Jean-Jacques; Toussaint-Louverture

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AMERICAN REACTION TO THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

Americans avidly followed the events that transpired on the French Caribbean island of Saint Domingue between 1789 and 1804—events historians later would collectively demarcate as a "Haitian Revolution." In an age when the movement of information was tied directly to patterns of trade, Saint Domingue's status as a juggernaut among Caribbean sugar-producing islands ensured that numerous American shippers would constantly be doing business on its wharves. Beginning in the years after the American Revolution, news from Saint Domingue moved regularly to ports along the North American littoral as producers, merchants, and consumers evaluated goings-on there for their impact on American markets. The advent of violence did not dampen economic opportunities; contact would continue throughout the 1790s and into the early nineteenth century.

In addition to economic motives, Americans were fixated on events in Saint Domingue because of their implications for political and sociocultural issues at home. Beginning in 1789, the French colony experienced a series of disruptions as various white factions battled over conflicting agendas related to changes brought about by the French Revolution. As events in France unfolded, the island's free colored population (which Americans usually termed "mulatto") attempted to secure the rights and benefits of the newly enlarged French citizenry. Violence erupted in 1790 and 1791 as various groups struggled over the degree of the colony's autonomy, over racial equality,