

in trade with the United States, and had opposed metropolitan attempts to have the colonists pay the costs of defence.

Although the whites at first saw the Revolution as a chance to advocate autonomy, they quickly came to fear its potential consequences. Thus, they sought to suppress news of events in France and of documents such as the Declaration of the Rights of Man. These fears and this news did, however, become well-known to the enslaved in the colonies, and rebellion began in Martinique and Guadeloupe as early as April 1790. As was often the case in such rumour-filled events, the enslaved came to believe that the King had proclaimed the end of slavery and that the people were held unjustly by their masters, or understood that the National Assembly had abolished whipping and reduced the days of plantation labour.

When the white French colonists of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and St Domingue argued that they alone were entitled to claim seats in the National Assembly, this was protested by the free coloured. They had a limited victory when, in 1791, the National Assembly declared that the colonial legislatures should extend suffrage to all taxpaying adult males with free parents, but this was annulled a few months later. In 1794, the revolutionary government in France abolished slavery in all of its colonies, without compensation, something the slave owners had not included in their understanding of the scope of liberty and equality. Although this decision was made within the context of the metropolitan revolution's radical program of wealth redistribution and social transformation, it also represented a response to the struggles of the enslaved people of the French colonies for their own freedom, their own liberty and equality. Nowhere was this objective expressed more strongly or achieved so successfully as in St Domingue.

REVOLUTION IN ST DOMINGUE

The revolution in St Domingue was the most successful rebellion of enslaved people in world history. It saw the end of slavery, the establishment of the first black state in the Americas, and the expulsion of a major European imperial power. These events were dramatic in themselves but made even more striking by the fact that they occurred, not in an isolated, barely profitable colony, but happened

in one of the most valuable. Indeed, in the 1780s, the French could rightly claim St Domingue as the richest colony not just in the Caribbean but in the world. St Domingue produced almost one half of world sugar exports and an even larger proportion of the world's coffee. Other important exports were cotton, indigo, and cacao. All of these crops, with the exception of capital-intensive sugar, could be produced efficiently on small plantations, and the large population of poorer whites and free coloured people increasingly sought to live on their own properties and make the colony their home. Strong versions of local identity emerged, in opposition to the habit of absenteeism, and in the late 1760s, there were small rebellions of creole whites and free coloured in support of self-rule and commercial freedom. Many major French ports depended on trade with St Domingue and the related Atlantic slave trade, while the port cities of St Domingue were equally prosperous and supported large white and free coloured populations. Enlightenment arts and sciences prospered in the midst of one of the world's greatest slave societies.

By 1789, the population of St Domingue was about 520,000. The white population and the free coloured and free black population were roughly equal in numbers, each group accounting for about 5 percent of the population, but the other 90 percent of the people were enslaved. St Domingue had by far the largest slave population in the Caribbean. Because it had grown very rapidly in the eighteenth century – increasing three times between 1750 and 1789 – as many as two thirds of the people were Africa-born, the largest contingents coming from Central Africa. They worked in many occupations and an unusually high proportion were owned by free coloured and free black people, generally on small rural holdings or in the towns, but the common situation of those employed on sugar plantations was as harsh as elsewhere. Surprisingly, rebellions had been rare in St Domingue throughout the eighteenth century, though the unsuccessful Makandal conspiracy of 1757 had sought to achieve not only the complete destruction of the white master class but also political independence. Marronage was made relatively easy by the survival of forest in the interior.

The free coloured people of St Domingue had, thirty years before 1789, commenced a struggle for equal rights, but faced newly raised barriers that made their legal status worse than in most other slave

societies of the Americas. They were then denied entry to certain occupations, such as that of surgeon or midwife, and inhibited by sumptuary laws that defined the hairstyles and dress they might wear and the kinds of furniture they might have in their houses. Not only were the civil rights of the free coloured and free black people of St Domingue limited, but even what they had were being eroded away. The consequence was that the white colonists and the free coloured and free black people of St Domingue entered a period of conflict but without any of these free people seeking to include the enslaved in their struggle.

The enslaved people of St Domingue commenced their own struggle against slavery and their masters in August 1791. Unlike many earlier conspiracies, which had been betrayed, this time, the well-organized plan, developed over several weeks, was successfully kept secret until the last minute. The revolt spread swiftly along the northern plain. Many sugar and coffee plantations were burned, many French people killed, and many more forced to flee. With skilled leadership, the enslaved became an efficient fighting force, organized into highly mobile bands and employing guerrilla tactics wherever possible, in the manner of the Maroons. They fought in sites where cliffs and gorges made ambush easy, setting booby traps along the way. Whenever it seemed to offer an advantage, the rebels retreated into the hills and regrouped their forces for counterattacks, while returning to burn and ravage plantations.

Propertied free coloured men often fought alongside the whites, particularly after the grant of full civil rights in April 1792. The conflict became increasingly complex when governors representing revolutionary republican France were sent to St Domingue, with mixed messages on the attitude of the metropolis towards slavery. By the middle of 1793, Cap Français, the major port city on the north coast, lay in ruins. Thousands of whites fled the colony for the United States, Jamaica, and other nearby slave societies.

While declaring allegiance to France and a willingness to fight for the nation, the enslaved people of St Domingue made it clear they wished slavery to end, not only for fighting men but for all people, male and female, young and old. By August 1793, the institution had been officially abolished by the French revolutionary government's representatives in most regions. However, the people were

required to remain on their former plantations and work for wages, with the capacity to determine work schedules and other aspects of management. In the south of the colony, freedom was to be granted to slave soldiers only if they took the side of France, while the rest of the people were to return to the plantations. These pragmatic declarations made in St Domingue were eventually ratified by the Convention, in Paris, in February 1794. At the same time, the protestations of allegiance to France were diminished when some of the armies of the enslaved joined forces with Spanish troops from Santo Domingo – the eastern section of Hispaniola – in a project to take St Domingue from the French. The British had also joined the battle and they, too, like the French and the Spanish, attempted to gain the support of the rebel armies, particularly in the south, though all the while hoping to make St Domingue – the great rival of Jamaica – a British colony. It was hard to know who to trust.

From this apparent chaos emerged the best known leader of the St Domingue revolution, Toussaint Louverture. He was sceptical of the opportunistic declarations of the revolutionary representatives. A creole, born on a sugar plantation in 1743, Toussaint had worked his way up through the ranks of the rebel forces and found ready agreement among his fellow troops that the only realistic approach was to ignore the conditional proclamations of liberty and the solicitations of the Spanish and the British. To ensure final victory, Toussaint sought rather to expand the revolt. He rapidly increased the size of his army and joined battle with the free coloured forces as well as the French. By the beginning of 1794, only a handful of urban zones remained in French hands. However, the British occupied about one third of St Domingue and continued to pour in troops down to 1798. Initially regarded as liberators, the unfair behaviour of the British against the free coloured people led them to join forces with the slave contingents. Forced to fight the British as well as the Spanish on separate fronts, Toussaint eventually had to make an alliance with republican France in the middle of 1794. His army of 20,000 wore down the British troops, large numbers of whom died of disease, particularly yellow fever and malaria. When Spain ceded Santo Domingo to France in 1795, Toussaint became governor of the enlarged colony.

By 1796, some things seemed more certain. French elites were no longer powerful in St Domingue. Thousands of whites had been killed. Thousands of blacks had died, killed in battle with one side or the other, while thousands of enslaved people had been forced to migrate with their owners. The idea that those who remained should be once more enslaved or forced to bow to some form of white overlordship was impossible to accept. In the north, blacks were in control. In the south, the free coloured held sway, with the British in charge of the region's west. The old plantation system was in tatters, with production reduced to one quarter of what it had been five years before. Free coloured men were given lands in the south formerly held by whites, while blacks were forced to remain on the properties as workers. Although some of the formerly enslaved people feared that Toussaint wished to restore slavery, his plan was, rather, to restore the plantation system, and for this purpose he welcomed returning planters and sought to install a labour regime that was harsh but something less than slavery.

With the French, the British, and the Spanish finally out of the way, the potential for conflict between former allies became hard to ignore. War between the south, led by André Rigaud, and the north, commanded by Toussaint's fellow officer Jean-Jacques Dessalines, ended in victory for the northern army. Rigaud went into exile and many of his officers were shot. This left Toussaint the effective ruler of St Domingue and, ignoring France, he took sole responsibility for making treaties with the United States and Britain. In 1801, he proposed a constitution, based on the model of revolutionary France, which abolished slavery, installed equality, made commerce free, and established the Roman Catholic church as guardian of the one public religion. St Domingue was to be a colony of France but self-governing.

Toussaint then overreached himself by invading and annexing Santo Domingo, the former Spanish part of Hispaniola but now a French colony, a bold act that enraged Napoleon. Sending a large military force to St Domingue in 1802, Napoleon demanded the restoration of slavery in Santo Domingo, as the Spanish aristocracy desired, as well as advocating the maintenance of the newly established system of forced labour in the west. Napoleon's men succeeded better than expected and a vacillating Toussaint was

deported to France, where he died in 1803. However, the people of St Domingue soon came to realize that Napoleon's desire to restore plantation slavery was no mere threat. They learned that slavery had, in fact, been reestablished in the other French colonies and that the equal rights granted the people of colour had been taken away. Refusing to accept this as the fate of St Domingue, cohorts of rebels emerged all through the north, using guerrilla tactics to mount a broad attack. The French responded with general slaughter, killing tens of thousands of black and coloured people between late 1802 and early 1803. The rebel leaders, Dessalines and Henri Christophe, responded in kind. By the end of 1803, the French had been defeated in both the north and the south. The French army, reduced in numbers by perhaps 50,000, finally left the colony. The rebel armies were victorious. Many of the remaining white people were executed and the French were warned not to return.

Haiti, the black republic, declared its independence on the first day of 1804. In taking the ancient Taíno name of Haiti, the new state declared its indigeneity and its historicity, and perhaps also pointed to a manifest destiny that would see Haiti expand to occupy the entire island. Hearing that the French had made Napoleon their Emperor, Dessalines took the same title for himself and behaved in the same absolutist manner. Within two years he was dead, executed and humiliated by his own troops. In 1809, the French lost control of Santo Domingo and it became again a colony of Spain; slavery was restored but the plantation system languished. Eventually, the French abandoned their dream of once more imposing slavery on their formerly great plantation colony and even surrendered their hopes of making Haiti a French colony. In 1825, the independence of the Haitian republic was recognized by France and also by Great Britain. The United States delayed recognition until 1862, when it was advocated by Abraham Lincoln in the midst of the Civil War and linked with schemes for the resettlement or "colonization" of U.S. blacks in Haiti and elsewhere. The French recognition of independence came at a high price, granted only on condition that the Haitians pay an indemnity – 150 million francs – to cover the costs of the war. It was a heavy burden, though only ever paid in part.

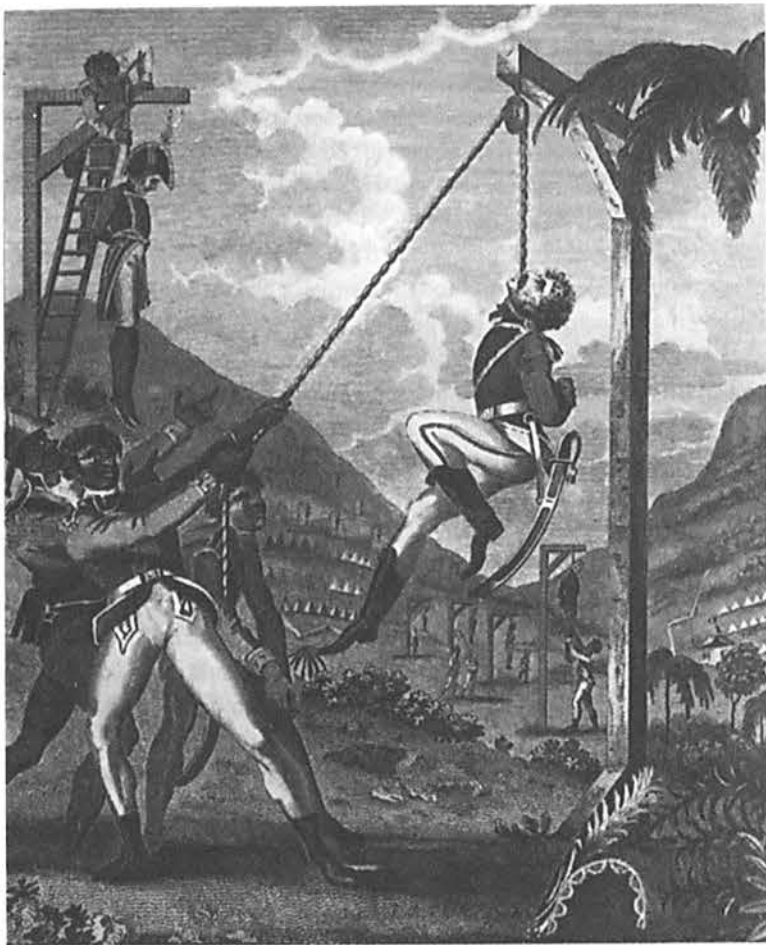


Plate 5.1. St Domingue executions, 1803. Source: Marcus Rainsford, *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* (London: James Cundee, 1805), opp. 337.

The success of the Haitian revolution is remarkable. The enslaved people achieved what the Taínos had been unable to do 300 years before, principally because the enslaved had access to weapons and horses, creating a more level battlefield. The enslaved people of St Domingue also achieved what their fellow slaves in the other French colonies of Martinique and Guadeloupe failed to secure. The comparison is important because, although both sets of colonies

shared the seemingly favourable context of metropolitan revolution with its cry for liberty and equality, only the enslaved people of St Domingue were able to make their own successful revolution. Their relative advantages were rooted in scale and topography, the broad and varied landforms of western Hispaniola and its long coastline creating ideal conditions for guerrilla warfare, together with the unusual feature of a long inland boundary. The people of St Domingue also benefited by the divisions and chaos resulting from the British and Spanish interventions. Further, to defeat the armies of the French and the British required not only quality military leadership, but also the resilience to carry the fight to the bitter end and a willingness to match atrocity with atrocity, massacre with massacre.

The outcome of the struggle remained uncertain to the end. The rebels declared their goal as “liberty or death” but it was the complementary motto “death to all whites” that drove them to victory. However bloody, it was this determination that ultimately ensured victory and established the great fear that inhibited attempts to restore slavery. The insurgent mass of enslaved people, unwilling to admit compromise, saw more clearly than did their leaders the necessity of continuing the war and completing the destruction. Their achievement was unique but it created a context in which the abolition of slavery elsewhere in the Caribbean seemed more certain, because the revolution invoked fear as well as hope. It also meant that, for much longer, the nation of Haiti would be forced to live as an outcast.

OTHER ABOLITIONS

~~The case of St Domingue was unusual in that the end of slavery as an institution preceded and effected the end of the Atlantic slave trade to that colony. Elsewhere in the Caribbean and throughout the Americas generally, the abolition of the Atlantic trade in people came first and often there was an extended period between this abolition and the abolition of slavery as a legal institution. The reason for the separation of the two abolitions and for the interval between them was essentially that it was easier to prohibit the trade than the institution because the owners of enslaved people in the~~