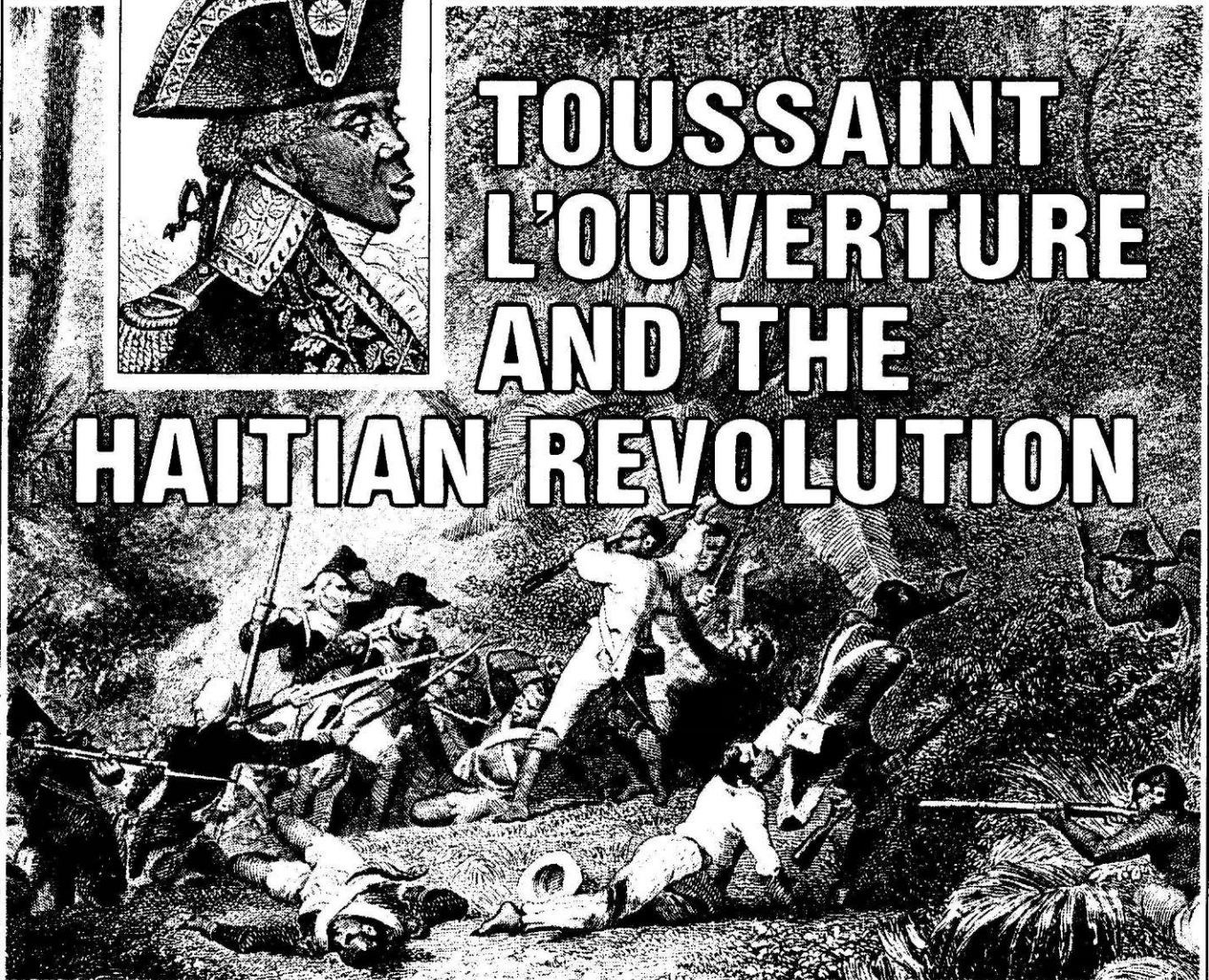


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# Black History and the Class Struggle No. 6



## TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE AND THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION



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# Birth of the First Black Republic: 1791-1804

## Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution



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**Above: Freed slaves battle French army. Toussaint's army fighting for their freedom and independence defeated the best troops Napoleon and the British could muster.**

Haiti today is a desperately poor country beset by neo-colonial exploitation and despotism. The Duvaliers, father and son, and their hand-picked successors are only the latest in a line of dictators propped up and frequently installed by Washington. Before that came 20 years of direct occupation by the United States Marines. Yet two centuries ago this land was the richest colony in the world. And in a dozen years of brutal struggle, a black slave revolt won Haiti's freedom in battle against the most powerful colonial empires of the era. The Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804 touched off a wave of slave revolts in the Caribbean and inspired blacks in the American South. Today, as the Haitian masses cry out for revolution to break the chains of imperialist domination and the most literal wage slavery, they will look back to the father of the first black republic, Toussaint L'Ouverture, the man known as *Black Spartacus*.

Toussaint forged an army of black slaves who won freedom for Haiti by defeating the best troops the British and



NY Public Library

**Toussaint L'Ouverture**

French colonial empires could muster. His regime restored the island's wealth and prosperity after the devastation of war. Toussaint was able to accomplish these remarkable achievements because he brought together the hurricane-like power of slave rebellion with the pro-

gram and ideals of the great bourgeois revolutions. Even if Haiti's independence would ultimately be won only in bitter battle against both the French Republic of Robespierre and the Empire of Napoleon, the French and American Revolutions were the detonators of the Haitian Revolution—from the military experience of mulatto commanders who fought in the French expeditionary force during the American Revolutionary War, to the adoption of the American revolutionary slogan "Live Free or Die," to the driving force of the watchwords "*Liberie, Fratemite, Egalite*."

The Haitian Revolution was a beacon in the fight against slavery and for national independence throughout the 19th century. But by abolishing slavery through a social revolution surging up from the very bottom of society, it

struck fear into the slavemasters and men of property. When the slaves rose up in Saint-Domingue, the French part of the island of Hispaniola, in August 1791, the United States hastened to send arms to put down the uprising. George Washington wrote, "How regrettable to see such a spirit of revolt among the Negroes." In the U.S., the Haitian Revolution inspired slave revolts from Denmark Vesey and Gabriel Prosser to Nat Turner. As the abolitionist fighter Frederick Douglass said, "When they struck for freedom, they bumbled better than they knew. Their swords were not drawn and could not be drawn simply for themselves alone. They were linked and interlinked with their race, and striking for their freedom, they struck for the freedom of every black man in the world."

### The Richest Sugar Colony

At the end of the 18th century, Saint-Domingue was described by the English economist Adam Smith as "the most important of the sugar colonies of the Caribbean." By 1783, trade with Saint-Domingue was more than a third of all French foreign commerce and more than double the value of Britain's trade with all its colonies taken together. Largely due to trade with the newly independent United States, production in Saint-Domingue nearly doubled between 1783 and 1789. By the start of the revolution two years later there were almost 800 sugar plantations, more than 2,000 coffee plantations and 3,000 of indigo. While sugar production in the British West Indies was declining, Saint-Domingue was at the height of its productivity and prosperity. Seeking to defend Britain's mercantile domination

of the Caribbean, William Pitt began to agitate for an end to the slave trade (though not slavery itself) in order to cut off the vital supply of labor to the burgeoning French colony.

In Saint-Domingue, the class and caste divisions of prerevolutionary France overlapped the race/color question. In 1789, this was perhaps the most race-conscious society in the world, legally recognizing 128 "degrees" of blackness (that is, counting all ancestors back seven generations). Broadly, society was divided into three essential strata. At the top were the white planters, economically dependent on the merchants of Bordeaux and Marseille, but, dominating a slave society, ideologically attached to privileges equivalent to those of a feudal aristocracy. At the bottom were the black slaves. In the middle were the mulattos, many of whom were freedmen, small businessmen and tradesmen; a significant number themselves owned slaves and were increasingly wealthy. By 1789 the mulattos owned nearly one-third of the property in Saint-Domingue.

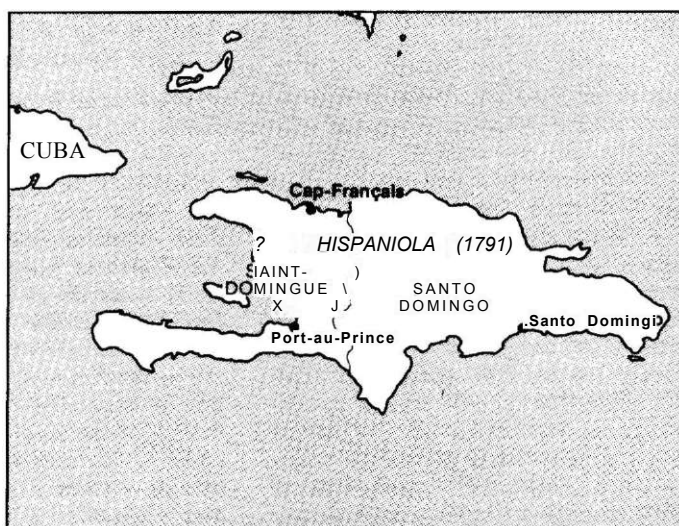
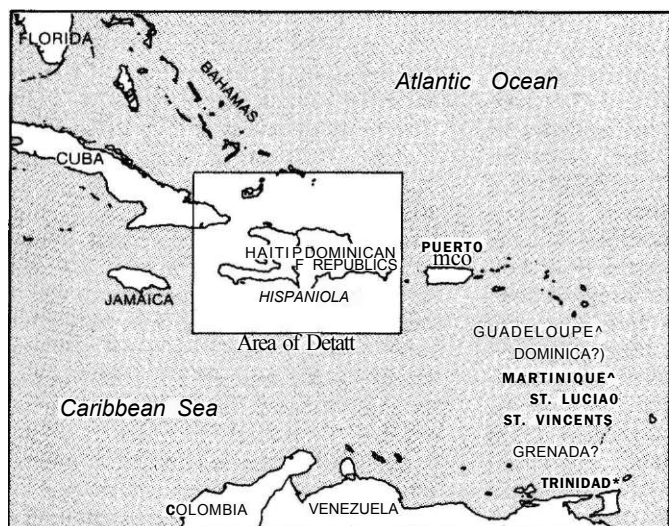
Like the classic petty bourgeoisie, the mulattos played a pivotal role, switching allegiances rapidly depending on the situation. At the outset of the French Revolution, these *gens de couleur* (men of color) were motivated by grievances against the aristocratic plantocracy. According to the *Code Noir* (Black Code) decreed by Louis XIV in 1685, the freedman was to enjoy "the same rights, privileges and immunities of persons born free." But a century later, these rights had been eroded so that "free" mulattos were forbidden to be on the streets after 9 p.m., to sit with whites in a public place, to bear a European name.

or even to wear clothes of European material and fashion. Mulatto women could wear petticoats of cotton but not silk, and petticoat inspectors stood at church doors requiring them to raise their skirts as they entered! The 40,000 whites in Saint-Domingue resorted to such grotesque discrimination to shore up their caste privileges against an almost equal number of mulattos, many of whom were educated in Europe and far wealthier than the poor whites.

When the French Revolution refused to grant them political rights and threatened existing rights because of their color, the mulattos allied with the black slaves. But when the French bourgeoisie sought an alliance with them based on private property (i.e., slavery), they turned and fought the slaves. Thus in Saint-Domingue the questions of color and class were directly related, and the mulattos' changes in position were an immediate reflection of this intersection. Originally a reflection of the distinction between property owners (mulattos) and slaves, the color hostility took on a life of its own in the course of the war against the French and the civil war which followed independence, laying the basis for much of Haitian politics even up to the present.

But the central preoccupation of French colonial society was to keep down the more than half a million black slaves. And for this purpose they employed extreme violence with barbarous ferocity. Vastey, a former slave who was secretary to the future black "king" Henri Christophe, raged against the crimes perpetrated against the slaves of Saint-Domingue:

"Have they not hung up men with heads downward, drowned them in sacks,



Workers Vanguard Maps

The Caribbean was divided among France, Britain and Spain. Slave revolts occurred nearly everywhere, but were successful only in French Saint-Domingue, renamed Haiti when it won independence in 1804.



Flammarion

Painting by Delacroix (detail): "Liberty leading the masses." French Revolution sparked revolt by mulattos and blacks for freedom and abolition of slavery in the French colonies.

crucified them on planks, buried them alive... flayed them with the lash... lashed them to stakes in the swamp to be devoured by mosquitoes... thrown them into boiling caldrons of cane syrup... put men and women inside barrels studded with spikes and rolled them down mountainsides into the abyss... consigned these miserable blacks to man-eating dogs until the latter, sated by human flesh, left the mangled victims to be finished off with bayonet and [dagger]?"

—cited in Robert and Nancy Heintz, *Written in Blood: The Story of the Haitian People, 1492-1971* (1978)

The French masters were even more brutal than their British counterparts of the time as they were "breaking in" slaves imported from Africa in the murderous work of clearing new lands.

In barely 100 years of slavery in the French colony such extreme repression produced a succession of slave revolts, beginning as early as 1679 with the uprising of Padrejean and recurring throughout the 18th century—in 1724, 1730, 1734, 1740 and the legendary conspiracy of Macandal, who organized slaves in the North to poison their masters and was burned alive at the stake in 1758. In addition, there were bands of escaped slaves, the *marrons*, in the hills. In the last years before the Revolution (1785-1789), as a result of the explosive

economic growth, 150,000 slaves were imported into Saint-Domingue. Unlike in the American South in the 1800s, where most slaves were born in captivity in the U.S., fully 60 percent of all slaves in Saint-Domingue were born in Africa. The Marquis du Rouvray wrote in 1783: "This colony of slaves is like a city under the imminence of attack; we are treading on loaded barrels of gunpowder."

### Beginnings of the Haitian Revolution

The French Revolution of 1789 overthrew the monarchy and landed aristocracy and brought the mercantile bourgeoisie to power. It proclaimed the watchwords of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Yet the bourgeois revolutionaries in Paris dragged their feet on equality for freedmen and looked with horror on abolishing slavery in the colonies. This seeming paradox is explained by the fact that the wealth of the leading capitalists of the epoch—the shipbuilders, merchants and slave traders of Bordeaux, Nantes and Marseille—was dependent above all on the enormous profits flowing out of the sugar islands of the Antilles. The Girondins, who took power following

the execution of Louis XVI and the proclamation of the French Republic in 1792, were named after the region around Bordeaux, the Gironde. Even as the Revolution radicalized, it was not until the end of the Jacobin reign in 1794 that they reluctantly abolished slavery, and then only in the face of black revolt and to ward off an English attack on France's most lucrative colony.

The successive stages of the French Revolution were directly reflected in the developing revolution in Saint-Domingue, but through the prism of race/color/class divisions of the plantation society. The first phase of the Haitian Revolution resulted from the debate in the French Constituent Assembly on the question of who should have voting rights. The *Amis des Noirs* (Friends of the Blacks), which opposed the immediate emancipation of the slaves, asked only for the rights of freedmen under Louis XIV's Black Code. But despite their modest demands, the Assembly's resolution of 28 March 1790 did not resolve the rights of mulattos. It decreed that "any adult male person" with certain property qualifications could vote, without specifying that freedmen were "persons." (Slaves were considered "property.") And implementation of the decree was put in the hands of the colonial assembly, which refused to promulgate it. Both the mulattos and the planters were infuriated. The balance of forces would decide.

The freedmen's response came from Vincent Oge, a mulatto intellectual who had been active in Paris among the *Amis des Noirs*. Disappointed with the decree of March 28, he returned to Saint-Domingue via the United States where he obtained guns and ammunition. He was joined by Jean-Baptiste Chavannes, a professional soldier who had fought with the French in the American war. The mulatto revolt at Cap-Français in October 1790 was quickly crushed; the leaders fled to the Spanish side of the island, but were captured and turned over to the French colonists. Even though they appealed to the common interests of whites and mulattos as slave-owners, Oge and Chavannes were brutally tortured and executed on the wheel—at the opposite end of the square to that reserved for the execution of whites.

Blood was flowing in the colonies, and the division among the slaveowners threatened to provide an opening for the blacks to rise up. Raymond, leader of the *Amis des Noirs*, pleaded for equality for the mulattos, arguing that

"if nevertheless the blacks want to revolt, they will not be able to, because the persons of color, interested in keeping them in slavery, will unite with the whites and will then constitute a single class." On 15 May 1791 the Constituent Assembly granted the mulattos some political rights, while constitutionally "protecting" slavery. These concessions were the cement that held together the French-mulatto alliance for the next several years. They were aimed at maintaining property rights and the vital economy of Saint-Domingue, all the more urgent in the face of the rising of the Paris masses and attacks on the French Revolution by the European monarchies. But it was already too late. While the Revolution was marking time in the metropole, the blacks were rising in Saint-Domingue.

Planters in the North were in revolt against the decrees of the Paris Assembly. They had arrested a mulatto leader, Andre Rigaud, a large landowner who had also fought along with the 800 Saint-Domingue "colored" volunteers at the siege of Savannah in the American Revolutionary War. French troops freed Rigaud, and the mulattos prepared to form a federation in the South. But before they could move, a black slave insurrection broke out. The leader was Boukman, a work-gang leader in Limbe, the same place where Macandal had launched his conspiracy. On the night of 14 August 1791, Boukman held the famous ceremony at Bois Cayman where the slaves vowed to revolt. A week later the insurrection was general in the northern plain—the richest and most prosperous area of the country. Some 200 sugar plantations and 600 coffee estates were laid waste and hundreds of whites killed. At this point, it was more an inchoate *jacquerie* (peasant revolt) than a revolution. When they attacked Cap-Franpais, they were defeated and Boukman killed.

### The Rise of Toussaint L'Ouverture

Yet the battle had been joined. It was at this time that Toussaint L'Ouverture threw in his lot with the rebels. Toussaint was, as his best biographer, C.L.R. James, has written, undoubtedly one of the political and military geniuses of the late 18th century. In ten years of warfare, he forged groups of illiterate slaves into a disciplined army which evoked the astonishment of European commanders and defeated both a British expeditionary force and the best troops Napoleon could muster at the height of his power. A British military historian,

Fortescue, has put total British losses at 100,000, including 40,000 dead—more than the total losses of Wellington's army from all causes in the Spanish Peninsular campaign. The French lost over 55,000 soldiers in Saint-Domingue, including veteran troops of Napoleonic victories.

After Boukman's death, Toussaint rose rapidly. A small, frail man with an iron will, Toussaint had led a relatively privileged life under an enlightened master. He was literate and had read widely, including the 1780 treatise on the politics and economics of the Indies by Abbe Raynal, who declared of the fugitive slaves: "Those lightnings announce the thunder. A courageous chief

to be dealt with as such. In order to give himself time and establish a safe retreat, Toussaint formed a temporary alliance with the Spanish, retaining his freedom of movement and command, and the organizational integrity of his forces. Nevertheless, Toussaint was on the verge of failure when Louis XVI was executed in January 1793. The British, seeing an opportunity both to defeat the hated Revolution and regain a monopoly of trade in cotton, indigo, coffee—and slaves!—declared war on France and prepared to seize the French colonies in the Antilles. The threat of invasion of France and the Paris masses' demands to halt the spiraling price of food brought the Jacobins to power.

**Leaders of the Haitian Revolution. Boukman led an initial slave revolt in 1791; Chavannes and Ogé were brutally tortured and murdered by the French. Rigaud fought in the American Revolution and was a commander under Toussaint. Dessalines completed the struggle for independence but was assassinated by his own army in 1806, after which Christophe ruled the black north and Rigaud the mulatto south.**



Macmillan Company

only is wanted." From Caesar's *Commentaries* he derived valuable military knowledge. He had already gained organizational experience, having risen to the position of steward of livestock, in charge of hundreds of slaves and foremen. With this background, at the age of 45, "Old Toussaint" joined the slave revolt. But with the Constituent Assembly under Girondins in alliance with the mulattos, the former slaves faced the combined forces of the mulattos and the French.

The blacks were considered outlaws,

Still the Revolution refused to come to grips with the question of slavery. But the all-sided civil war in Saint-Domingue forced the issue.

As the Republic was in its birth pangs, Paris had dispatched three commissioners led by the right-wing Jacobin Sonthonax. By the summer of 1793, he had pacified the South by placing the mulatto leader Rigaud in command, and defeated a royalist uprising in the North by forming black regiments with the promise of freedom to all those who fought against their former masters. On



Culver Pictures

**Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831, one of many slave revolts that looked to the Haitian Revolution for inspiration.**

August 29, faced with a British fleet at sea, a Spanish invasion on land and Cap-Français in ruins, he took the fateful step, abolishing slavery with the proclamation: "The slave-drivers and cannibals are no more—The Republic desires liberty and equality among all men regardless of color; kings are content only amid slaves." Sonthonax acted of his own accord. As late as November 1793, Robespierre attacked the Girondins for wanting to undermine France by plotting "to immediately free and arm all blacks to destroy our colonies."

By happenstance, the very day Sonthonax decreed the liberation of the slaves, Toussaint issued his famous proclamation, declaring:

"Brothers and Friends,  
"I am Toussaint L'Ouverture, my name has perhaps become known to you. I have undertaken vengeance. I wish Liberty and Equality to reign over Saint-Domingue. I strive to make them happen. Join with us, brothers, and fight with us in the common cause."

Since Sonthonax' decree had not been ratified by the Convention, Toussaint did not trust it and continued to fight against the mulatto armies under Rigaud and Beauvais. Faced with the British invasion and Toussaint's progress, in February 1794 the Convention finally ratified the abolition of slavery in the colonies. When news of ratification reached Saint-Domingue weeks later, the British were on the verge of successfully occupying the entire island.

Toussaint immediately broke with the Spanish and rallied to the forces of the Republic against the slaveholding British. In a series of lightning campaigns, winning seven victories in as many days, Toussaint's army rapidly reversed the situation, and drove the British onto the defensive.

### The Reign of Toussaint

Toussaint L'Ouverture soon became master of the island. The governor was General Laveaux, who after being saved by Toussaint from mulatto rebels at Cap-Français acclaimed his rescuer "that black Spartacus foreseen by Raynal, whose destiny is to avenge the outrages on his race." In France, in the meantime, the Jacobins had been overthrown in the coup of 9 Thermidor (24 July 1794) and the Directory was in power. Encouraged by Thermidor and by appeals from the colonists, the British hung on in isolated outposts for two more years before finally evacuating. The Directory formally approved Toussaint's victories and increasing power. He was made Lieutenant Governor of the colony in April 1796 and commander in chief of the French forces in March 1797. At the same time, the Directory rightly realized that the logical extension of Toussaint's course was independence and, unwilling to accept something akin to a commonwealth status, which Toussaint desired, they began plotting his overthrow.

In 1797 Paris sent a new emissary as Sole Agent to the colony, Hedouville. Hedouville had secret orders to do everything in his power to curb Toussaint's powers and eventually to eliminate him. Hedouville succeeded in poisoning relations between Toussaint and the mulatto leader Rigaud, so that the loose bloc between them became a de facto separation of Saint-Domingue into two entities: Toussaint in the rich plantations of the overwhelmingly black North, and Rigaud in the South, the historical center of mulatto power. When Toussaint defeated the British, he refused to allow Hedouville to accept General Maitland's surrender, accepting it personally instead. His triumphal entry into Port-au-Prince, renamed Port Republicain, as French representatives looked on, signaled his triumph. Yet Hedouville continued his intrigues, attempting to pit Toussaint's nephew, Moïse, against him.

Finally Toussaint reacted, dismissing Hedouville, who fled back to France. His last act was to promote Rigaud to equal rank with Toussaint and to declare him the independent commander in the South. In his official report, Hedouville called on the Directory to "embitter the hate which exists between the Mulattoes and the blacks and to oppose Rigaud to Toussaint." The mulattos were to be the beachhead for the return of French power and, eventually, the restoration of slavery. Toussaint obviously could not tolerate this situation and had to subdue the South. The bloody civil war, pitting blacks against mulattos, lasted about a year and cemented the distrust and even hatred between the mulattos and blacks. When Toussaint sent his lieutenant Dessalines to restore order in the rebellious army, Dessalines unleashed a bloodbath against mulatto officers. In response Toussaint is reported to have said: "I said to prune the tree, not uproot it."

With the South integrated, Toussaint marched on the slaveholding Spanish half of the island (directly contravening the instructions of the French) and took it over in a lightning campaign. On 7 February 1801, he proclaimed in Santo Domingo the liberation of the slaves (Juan Bosch, *De Cristobal Colon a Fidel Castro: El Caribe, frontera imperial* [1969]). In contrast to Dessalines' later invasion and Solouque's bloody debacle in 1844, Toussaint carefully avoided aggravating racial tensions, appointing a mulatto governor. Ruler of a unified and rich island, Toussaint now faced problems more intractable than those posed by foreign troops. Twelve

years of warfare and civil war had devastated the island's economy. Two-thirds of the whites had left or been killed (though three-quarters of the mulattos remained) and perhaps a third of the black population had perished. Ever since Sonthonax, blacks had said, "*Moin pas esclave, moin pas travaye*" (I'm not a slave, I won't work).

The plantations were in ruin: Toussaint urgently had to salvage them. To restore productivity, he was forced to militarize the entire economy, placing planters and laborers under what amounted to martial law, eventually confining workers to the plantations. Anyone without employment was to be conscripted into the army. Instead of breaking up the large plantations into subsistence plots, he maintained them as the most efficient form of production. At the same time, he banished the whip, that symbol of slavery, and decreed that laborers receive one-quarter of the produce. Realizing that he needed the skills that only the whites and mulattos possessed, Toussaint left them in charge of the plantations. But he made them directly answerable to the black army,

and purchased 30,000 guns from America. He would wave a rifle at public gatherings, shouting to the black laborers: "Here is your freedom!" His general staff was composed almost totally of whites, but his army was led by black generals.

Not unlike Trotsky, who following the Russian October Revolution used tsarist officers in building the Red Army, Toussaint made use of the most talented and capable people he could find. And it worked: in the two years of his administration, Toussaint was well on his way to restoring the economy to its former wealth. There was a noted drop in black-mulatto hostility and a thriving trade with the United States, from which Saint-Domingue imported foodstuffs and arms. But he was faced with an intractable problem: the Haitian economy was based on large-scale plantation cultivation of coffee, sugar, cacao. At that point in history, before the industrial revolution mechanized farm production, the only possible way this production could succeed was with a degree of labor discipline at least roughly equivalent to what had existed

under slavery, whether voluntary or not. Nevertheless, freedom was decisive for the black ex-slaves. As C.L.R. James put it:

"The black labourers were free, and though there might be dissatisfaction with the new regime, as in the Paris of 1800, there was no regret for the old. Where formerly the labourers had worked from dawn until far into the night, now work began at five and ended at five. No employer dared to beat them. Dessalines whipped blacks in his province, and Toussaint threatened to take away his command at the least complaint."

—C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1963)

Toussaint's use of whites and mulattos in positions of privilege caused wide-scale resentment among the blacks, in particular in the Northern province, governed by Toussaint's nephew Moïse. In September 1801 revolt broke out, in some places under the slogan "Long Live Moïse." Moïse refused to take a clear position, and the revolt was defeated by Toussaint, Christophe and Dessalines. Toussaint had Moïse shot.

## Slave Revolts in the Americas

"Do they think that men who have been able to enjoy the blessing of liberty will calmly see it snatched away?... But no, the same hand which has broken our chains will not enslave us anew. France will not revoke her principles.

"But if, to re-establish slavery in Saint-Domingue, this was done, then I declare to you it would be to attempt the impossible: we have known how to face dangers to obtain our liberty, we shall know how to brave death to maintain it."

—Toussaint L'Ouverture,  
"Letter to the Directory"  
(1796)

In January 1802, a French armada anchored in Samana Bay on the east coast of Hispaniola. With 20,000 veteran troops and officers, the invasion force was the largest expedition that had ever sailed from France. It was sent, said Napoleon Bonaparte to his foreign minister Talleyrand, "to annihilate the government of the blacks in Saint-Domingue" (Haiti). From the heights overlooking the harbor watched Toussaint L'Ouverture, the ex-slave who led the revolution that broke the chains of slavery, who defeated the British, unified the island and restored its prosper-



**Black slaves battle white colonial masters in 1791.**

Bibliothèque d'Histoire Coloniale

ity after a devastating war. All that had been won through colossal struggle was now at risk.

Toussaint knew that Napoleon's war fleet had come to re-enslave the blacks,

just as surely as Napoleon could see that Toussaint's policy led inexorably to independence. French admiral Leclerc brought with him a letter promising to respect black freedom...and secret

instructions to restore slavery as soon as Toussaint was eliminated. "Rid us of these gilded Africans," cried out Napoleon, whose wife Josephine was a plantation owner from the Antilles. But the racist ravings of the First Consul of France, and his crack troops could not defeat the revolutionary black army fighting, literally, for "Liberty or Death."

Toussaint L'Ouverture was a man of the French Revolution. While he did not trust Napoleon, at the same time Toussaint could not bring himself to deny his political origins and break sharply from France. Toussaint presided over what was de facto an independent country. He signed treaties with the British and Americans. In May 1801 he promulgated a constitution proclaiming Saint-Domingue an "independent colony of France" and himself governor-general for life. But he did not come to grips with the fact that Thermidor had partially reversed the conquests of the Revolution. So at a crucial moment, he was politically paralyzed.

Napoleon's campaign lasted from February to June 1802. During this time Toussaint's forces bested the French militarily, but his failure to rouse the blacks to all-out resistance, to warn that French victory would bring back the slavemaster's whip, politically disarmed his followers. As his key generals—Christophe, Maurepas and the mulattos Rigaud and Petion—defected to the French, Toussaint concluded a truce. Shortly afterwards, he walked into an obvious trap and was kidnapped by the French. He was deported to a cold damp mountain cell in the Jura, 6,000 miles away, mistreated and deprived of medical care until he died in April 1803 at the age of 55.

### Toussaint: Black Spartacus and Black Jacobin

All historians have asked the same question: given Toussaint's brilliance, his awareness of what Napoleon's expedition had to mean, why did he give up when he could have defeated the French and declared independence? Aime Cesaire, the literary champion of *negritude* and obedient satrap of the French colony of Martinique, speculates that Toussaint's surrender was a "sacrifice," that he would "leave in order to unite" blacks and mulattos against the colonial power. Nevertheless: "The truth is that the defeat of Toussaint was not military in nature but political. There is a magic word that Toussaint always refused to say: the word *independence*' (Aime Cesaire, *Toussaint Louverture* [1961]).

C.L.R. James writes that Toussaint's "allegiance to the French Revolution and all it opened out for mankind in general and the people of San Domingo in particular...had made him what he was. But this in the end ruined him" (*Black Jacobins* [1938]). James, who was then a Trotskyist but later became a Pan-Africanist, contends that Toussaint alienated the black masses, refusing to take racial feelings sufficiently into account, and that this led to his downfall. He writes: "These anti-white feelings of the blacks were no infringement of liberty and equality, but were in reality the soundest revolutionary policy." What Toussaint rejected was the mass slaughter of whites, carried out later by Dessalines following independence,



Haiti-Progress  
**Dessalines brought Thermidor to Haitian Revolution while winning final war of independence. Crowned himself Emperor Jacques I in 1804.**

which far from being "sound revolutionary policy" led instead to economic devastation.

Both James and Cesaire assume that the logical outcome of the Haitian Revolution could only be independence as it ultimately occurred. They project 20th century national liberation struggles back to the dawn of the 19th century, and equate the Haitian black struggle with the North American and Latin American wars of independence. This misses what was fundamental to Toussaint: the connection with the French Revolution, the vanguard of social progress of the epoch, the only capitalist country which (however reluctantly) had decreed the abolition of slavery. The Liberator of Saint-Domingue was

on the cutting edge of the transatlantic bourgeois-democratic social revolution.

There is a direct connection here to Toussaint's attitude toward the former plantation owners. He was motivated not by love toward the Saint-Domingue whites, whose bestial crimes against the slaves produced the black masses' thirst for vengeance. Rather, as James writes, "he was convinced that San Domingo would decay without the benefits of the French connection." While criticizing Toussaint's supposed "unrealistic attitude to the former masters," James is right in recognizing that this sprang "from a recognition that they alone had what San Domingo society needed." Similarly, with the French connection the white officers who made up Toussaint's staff were in the forefront of revolutionary struggle; without it they became at best mercenaries, at worst fifth columnists.

For Toussaint, independence was not a "magic word" but required collaboration with the most socially and economically advanced countries. He recognized intuitively that an isolated Haiti was condemned to sink to a poverty-stricken subsistence level. Leon Trotsky wrote in "Three Concepts of the Russian Revolution" (1939) referring to peasant revolutions in ancient China, "So long as the revolution maintained its purely peasant character, society did not emerge from these hopeless rotations." In Europe, in contrast, "a peasant uprising proved victorious only to the extent that it managed to establish the position of the city population's revolutionary sector." Haiti without a connection to the vanguard of the bourgeois revolution—France—was a peasant revolt without the city.

The key to understanding Toussaint, as C.L.R. James' title accurately puts it, is that Toussaint was above all a *black Jacobin*:

"What revolutionary France signified was perpetually on his lips, in public statements, in his correspondence, in the spontaneous intimacy of private conversation. It was the highest stage of social existence that he could imagine...No one else was so conscious of its practical necessity in the social backwardness and primitive conditions of life around him."

Toussaint desperately tried up to the end to influence the course of the French Revolution, linking up with the most advanced elements embodied by the Jacobins. But following the overthrow of the Jacobins on 9 Thermidor (27 July 1794), a political counterrevolution set in which ultimately meant the re-establishment of slavery in the colonies.





John Stockdale, London

**Leonard Parkinson (above), leader in 1795 Jamaica Maroon revolt (right), aided by Jacobin commissioners.**



J. Bourgoïn

The defeat of Toussaint in Saint-Domingue was not due to some "unrealistic attitude" toward whites, but was the direct consequence of the defeat of Robespierre and Saint-Just in Paris.

The triumph of Thermidorean reaction with the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte cut short the international spread of the revolutionary-democratic wave. For blacks in Hispaniola it meant that without an alliance with an advanced country where the industrial revolution was taking hold, like France, an isolated national independence was the only alternative to the reimposition of slavery, as the "party of property" decapitated the Jacobin revolutionaries, white and black.

### Dessalines and Thermidor

Following Toussaint's death, Dessalines broke with the French, ripped the white stripe out of the Tricolor and began the struggle for independence. When news of the restoration of slavery in Guadeloupe reached Saint-Domingue in July 1803, the revolt became general. In six months, it was all over. The French withdrew in December, independence was declared on 1 January 1804, and the new state was named Haiti (*Ayiti* is an Arawak Indian word meaning mountains). The annihilation of the Napoleonic armies led immediately to Napoleon's decision to abandon further expansion into the Americas and thus opened the door to the Louisiana Purchase of 1804.

Dessalines fought and won the final

battle for independence. Today the Haitian left uncritically accepts the Duvaerist glorification of Dessalines as "founder of the nation." *But Dessalines succeeded where Toussaint failed precisely because he brought Thermidor to Saint-Domingue.*

While Dessalines' Declaration of Independence speaks eloquently of Freedom, it does not mention Equality or Fraternity. In symbolic imitation of Napoleon, he had himself crowned Emperor Jacques the First in October 1804. As a result of Dessalines' large-scale slaughter of whites (although it pales in comparison with the standard treatment those same whites had routinely inflicted on black slaves) he destroyed the trained cadres crucial to economic progress. For the masses of blacks, he reintroduced whipping in barely disguised form with the *liane* (a lash made up of vines), as a means of ensuring labor discipline.

To his advisers who protested that the masses should be provided with moral education in the spirit of the French Revolution, Dessalines replied: "you are wrong: the laborers can be controlled only by fear of punishment and even death; I shall lead them only by these means; my 'morale' shall be the bayonet."

Within two years, there was a widespread revolt. Dessalines was assassinated by his own army in October 1806 and his body stoned by the crowd as it was dragged through Port-au-Prince. The country split. After 1806 the black

north was ruled by Christophe and the mulatto south first by Rigaud and then Petion. Christophe instituted an autocratic regime in the north, while in the mulatto south the forms of a republic were maintained. But there the plantations were broken up into small plots and the economy rapidly declined toward bare subsistence level, with the new mulatto bourgeoisie firmly in the saddle. It was not until 1820 that Haiti was reunited under the mulatto Boyer following Christophe's death.

### Haiti and Caribbean Slave Revolts

But as the ex-slaves of Saint-Domingue were defeating the colonial armies of Britain and France, they were not alone. The Haitian Revolution sparked slave revolts throughout the Caribbean; more than that, it linked them to international bourgeois-democratic revolution.

From the beginning of the plantation system, slaves had risen up to throw off their chains of servitude. The first black slave uprising in the New World was recorded in 1522, on the island of Hispaniola, when West African Wolofs fled from the sugar estate of Admiral Diego Colon. From then on, slave risings occurred almost yearly during the 16th and 17th centuries on one or another Caribbean island.

The slave uprisings were everywhere viciously repressed. Those who escaped fled into the interior to set up colonies of maroons (*marrons* in French, *cimarron*

nes in Spanish). Maroons frequently sought to come to terms with the slaveholders, tracking down runaways and aiding in suppressing slave revolts, yet the planters turned on them, finding the existence of communities of free blacks intolerable. However, in the maroon revolts, slaves at most sought to escape the master's whip, never to overthrow the system of slavery.

The Haitian Revolution changed all that, shifting the goal from restoration of primitive communal African social relations to the spread of social revolution. And this was made possible precisely by the combination of the greatest slave revolt of all with the bourgeois revolution in France. As Eugene Genovese has written, "the French Revolution provided the conditions in which a massive revolt in Saint-Domingue could become a revolution in its own right":

"By the end of the eighteenth century, the historical content of the slave revolts shifted decisively from attempts to secure freedom from slavery to attempts to overthrow slavery as a social system. The great black revolution in Saint-Domingue marked the turning point,"

—Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the New World* (1979)

Saint-Domingue was no backwater but the world's most lucrative colony, linked to the most dynamic sector of French capitalists. The ex-slaves of Hispaniola did not seek to erect an "oversized maroon colony" but joined with Parisian *sans-culottes* in the vanguard of the bourgeois-democratic rev-

olution. As Genovese notes: "The Haitian Revolution, in contradistinction to one more rising of slaves, would have been unthinkable without the French Revolution." And their fates were necessarily linked.

But before the (failed) Napoleonic invasion of Saint-Domingue, in the heyday of Jacobinism, the struggle for liberty, equality, fraternity and the destruction of slavery spread throughout the Caribbean, irrespective of the colonial master. An American historian has noted:

"... British slaves in most colonies were agitated by the potential of revolutionary unrest elsewhere and in Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Grenada took an important part in actual uprisings, which included radical whites as well as free coloreds, Caribs and maroons."

—Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (1982)

Much of this story turns around the activities of Victor Hugues, a mulatto Jacobin leader dispatched as a Republican commissioner to carry the revolution to the Windward Islands. Hugues came with only 1,500 men, a guillotine to impose revolutionary terror, and above all a printing press to publish the revolutionary decree of 16 Pluiose of Year 11 (4 February 1794) abolishing slavery in the colonies. Landing in Guadeloupe, he raised an army of ex-slaves who quickly drove out the British invaders. Soon Hugues was dispatching emissaries throughout the Antilles.


In 1795 revolts broke out in Gre-

nada, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Dominica and Jamaica. As a result, the British had to weaken their expeditionary force in Saint-Domingue. The first big rebellion was that led by the mulatto French planter Julien Fedon in Grenada. The mulattos, chafing under British colonial discrimination, sent delegates to Hugues in Guadeloupe who supplied them with arms and ammunition. They gathered an army of several thousand slaves which defeated successive British reinforcements. By the beginning of 1796, Grenada was effectively a black republic with the British hanging on only in the capital of St. George's.

Simultaneously Black Caribs in St. Vincent rose up together with French-speaking mulattos and likewise had bottled the British up in that island's capital. Meanwhile, the largest British Caribbean possession, Jamaica, was racked by the last of several maroon wars. As a result of the revolt in Trelawney Town in July 1795, the British were forced to withdraw to Jamaica troops just dispatched to bolster the expeditionary force in Saint-Domingue being pounded by Toussaint's black army. Even then, it took eight months to force the surrender of the last of the several hundred Jamaican insurgents led by Leonard Parkinson.

The Jacobin commissioners in Guadeloupe had also attempted to spark an uprising in June 1795 in Dominica, but the rebellion was discovered and crushed. Meanwhile, in the colony of Demarara (now Guyana) on the South American coast, slaves and maroons had revolted in 1795, the last year of

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Dutch rule. They were put down with difficulty as whites were divided between pro-British conservatives and partisans of the short-lived pro-French Dutch Batavian Republic. The unrest in the Windward Islands was crushed after the arrival in March 1796 of a British expeditionary force of 17,000 men.

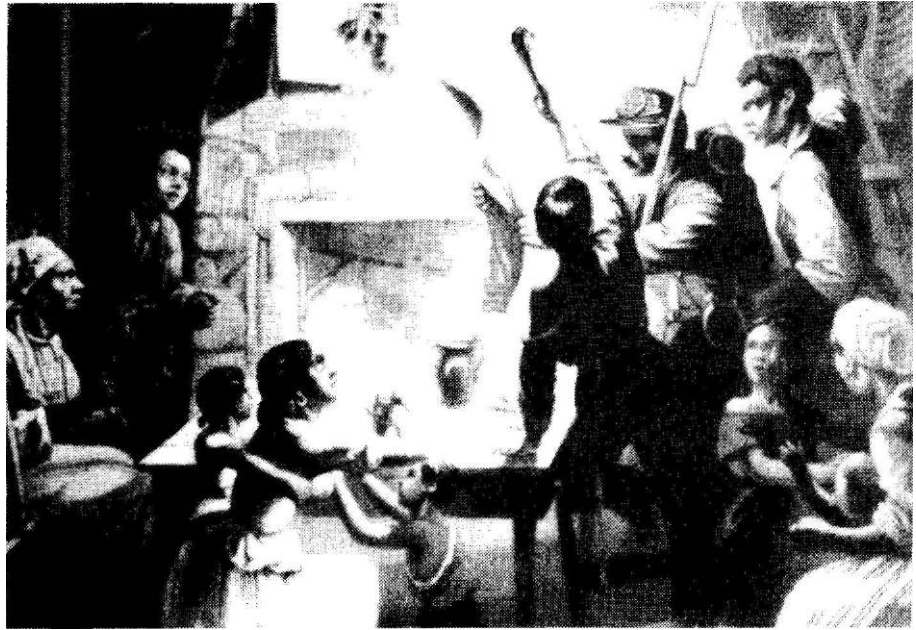
### The Haitian Revolution and Black Emancipation

Most importantly, as we have seen, the Haitian Revolution transformed struggles for black freedom from isolated, backward-looking slave revolts and linked them with the revolutionary-democratic tide throughout the Americas. Britain's abolition of the slave trade in 1807, while reflecting the commercial interests of the English bourgeoisie whose Caribbean colonies were in decline, was strongly influenced by fear of contagion spreading from Hispaniola. The young black republic was seen as a beacon for independence struggles worldwide: in the 1820s, the Greeks struggling for independence from Turkey appealed to Haiti for aid. Haiti responded by sending the only thing it could: coffee.

The Haitian Revolution also had an impact on the Latin American wars for independence. After Simon Bolivar had suffered a string of defeats in Venezuela, in 1815-16 Haiti twice gave him refuge and provided him with money and arms to return to the mainland to fight. At Haiti's request, the Liberator proclaimed the abolition of slavery in Spanish America. But Bolivar, scion of a landowning family, repaid the aid of the black former slaves by never recognizing Haitian independence and refusing to have Haiti invited to his projected Congress of American States in Panama.

News of the black revolution in Saint-Domingue also spread to the American South. In the wake of the slave insurrection, large numbers of French planters fled to North America, primarily to New Orleans and Charleston, bringing their slaves with them. Toussaint took care to spread the news, publishing official notice in the Charleston *City Gazette* of the decrees issued by his regime after its consolidation.

From the early 1790s on, real or suspected slave revolts were ascribed to the pernicious influence of the French Revolution. Thus a 1793 report in Portsmouth, Virginia notes: "Our town swarms with strange negroes, foreign and domestic\_\_\_The Household family negroes are trusty and well disposed, but many others did belong to the insurrection in Hispaniola." In 1796 a series of



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### During American Civil War, Union soldier reads Emancipation Proclamation to blacks in South.

recurrent fires in Charleston were ascribed to arson by "French negroes" who "certainly intended to make a St. Domingo business of it."

The leaders of American slave conspiracies and revolts all looked to Haiti as an example. The undeclared war between the U.S. and France led Gabriel Prosser to expect French assistance for his aborted revolt in 1800. In Philadelphia in 1804, embattled blacks rallied against a racist mob attack under the shout of "show them a San Domingo." And in the slave revolt in southern Louisiana in 1811, the largest in American history, one leader, Charles Deslondes, was a free mulatto from Saint-Domingue.

In many parts of the American South, free blacks refused to celebrate July 4th, celebrating instead Haitian Independence Day. In 1822, Denmark Vesey, who had visited Haiti, twice wrote to the Haitian president seeking aid for his revolt. His plan was eventually to escape to Haiti after seizing Charleston. Indeed, he originally symbolically scheduled the revolt to begin on Bastille Day in honor of the French Revolution. Following Vesey's revolt, South Carolina outlawed the entry of blacks from the Caribbean and the disembarkation of any black crewman coming from the region.

In 1825, Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri declared, "We receive no mulatto consuls or black ambassadors from [Haiti]. And why? Because the peace of eleven states will not permit the fruits of a successful Negro insurrection to be exhibited among

them" (Nicholas Halasz, *The Rattling Chains* [1966]). The next year, slaves hijacked a ship and attempted to force it to sail to Haiti. Nat Turner, who rose up in southeastern Virginia in 1831, was also inspired by the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Despite all the corruption and shortcomings, Haiti stood as a beacon to the oppressed of all countries. And its impact was above all to join the fight for black freedom to a broader revolutionary-democratic struggle. The prime example was the American Civil War, with the Emancipation Proclamation which finally declared the abolition of slavery, and the enrollment of 200,000 black troops under the Union banners. Haiti was the only former British or French colony which backed the North in the war, and it was only in the course of this second American revolution that the U.S. finally recognized the black republic.

Frederick Douglass, the great black abolitionist, summed up the impact of the Haitian Revolution in 1893 after spending several years in Port-au-Prince as the U.S. consul:

"We should not forget that the freedom you and I enjoy to-day; that the freedom that eight hundred thousand colored people enjoy in the British West Indies; the freedom that has come to the colored race the world over, is largely due to the brave stand taken by the black sons of Haiti ninety years ago."

Haiti has "taught the world the danger of slavery and the value of liberty," he went on, and "striking for their freedom. they struck for the freedom of every black man in the world." •