

Anarchy in the Haitian Revolution

Anarchy In Action

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Following many years of hidden and small-scale resistance, African slaves in the French colony of Saint Domingue (or San Domingo) rose up in 1791 against their colonizers and slave masters. By 1804, they abolished slavery, expelled the French colonizers, and established the independent republic of Haiti. Haiti was the name given to the Caribbean island by the Tainos before colonizers arrived, slaughtered the entire indigenous population, and imported African slaves.

While the 1776 and 1789 revolutions of the USA and France were grounded in exclusionary “citizens’ rights,” the Haitian Revolution stood out for a commitment to universal human rights. Thanks to the revolution, Haitians enjoyed freedom from enslavement for some forty-six years from 1802 to 1848. According to Nick Nesbitt, the Haitian Revolution was “the culmination of a radical strand of Enlightenment political philosophy that acted upon Spinoza’s revolutionary proposition: to avoid insofar as possible the alienation of constituent power to representative bodies and to ‘always preserve the natural right in its entirety.’”¹

As Russell Maroon Shoatz, a former Black Panther, summarizes, the Haitian Revolution saw two competing tendencies: a centralized “dragon” and a decentralized “hydra”:

There, between 1791 and 1804, we witness one of the most titanic struggles ever engaged in between (enslaved) workers and their overlords. It is through an examination of the events surrounding that struggle that we can clearly measure the strengths and weaknesses of our dragon and hydra: centralized and decentralized forces of change.²

Maroonage and Hidden Resistance

In the years preceding the revolution, slaves resisted their conditions through subversive ritual, strikes, running away, and occasionally violent revolts.

Gathered in private, slaves would practice “voodoo” rituals aimed at controlling their masters’ souls. As many as two-thirds of the slaves had been born in Africa on the revolution’s eve, and thus the rituals borrowed elements from a variety of African traditions.³ Slaves sang, “We swear to destroy the whites and all that they possess; let us die rather than fail to keep this vow.”⁴

In public, they found ways to more subtly maintain a culture of opposition. When they heard the church’s funeral bells, Blacks sang along with their own lyrics, “One good white is dead. The bad ones are still here.”⁵ The historian Laurent Dubois speculates that the hidden meaning may have been, “[T]he only good white was a dead one.”⁶

Slaves commonly walked off the job and ran away, for short and long periods of time. In 1744, sixty-six slaves walked off the plantation in protest of a cruel overseer. The overseer retaliated by

¹ Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 12.

² Russell Maroon Shoatz, “The Dragon and the Hydra: A Historical Study of Organizational Methods,” *The Anarchist Library*, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/russell-maroon-shoatz-the-dragon-and-the-hydra>.

³ Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004), 42-44.

⁴ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, Second Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 18.

⁵ Dubois, *Avengers*, 11.

⁶ Dubois, *Avengers*, 11.

killing one of the strikers, a pregnant woman. The slaves then killed the overseer and were condemned to death, but the governor intervened to save them. According to Dubois, “Such strikes occurred with some regularity and often led to the negotiated return of the slaves.”⁷ Probably as a result of such actions, slaves secured a number of rights, including the right to have their own garden plots and to spend most of the weekend tending to their plots and selling the products in town for personal profit.⁸

At times, the runaways or “maroons” left permanently, and by 1751, there were about three thousand maroons.⁹ Many lived under the leadership of the chief Mackandal. Occasionally invoking Allah and asserting an ability to turn into a fly, Mackandal organized a large army of maroons to try to poison the white masters’ water. He was betrayed, captured, and burned alive. Some followers believed he changed shape and escaped just before his execution in 1758.¹⁰

1791 revolt

On 21 August 1791, slaves began a series of arsons and massacres around the region of Le Cap. On 22 August, a band inspired by two enslaved Vodum (Voodoo) practitioners—a man named Boukman and a woman who might have been named Cécile Fatiman—destroyed a number of plantations. The revolt “was led by scores of decentralized bands of African workers.”¹¹ C.L.R. James summarizes:

Each slave-gang murdered its masters and burnt the plantation to the ground [...] For nearly three weeks the people of Le Cap could barely distinguish day from night, while a rain of burning cane straw, driven before the wind like flakes of snow, flew over the city and the shipping in the harbour, threatening both with destruction.¹²

Committing a small fraction of the violence afflicted on them by masters, some slaves reportedly “violated women” and one allegedly “carried a white child on a pike as standard.”¹³ Given the legacy of brutal enslavement, however, the rebels were “surprisingly moderate” in James’s judgment, and they “spared many of the men, women, and children.”¹⁴

Among the many decentralized groups were: maroon rebels such as Jean Francois and Bissou and Lamour Derance, enslaved rebels including Romaine the Prophetess and Hyacinthe, mulattos, and “a small segment of whites who were in league with the anti-slavery wing of the French Jacobins, and who loosely allied themselves with one rebel group or another.”¹⁵

Not long after the start of the revolt, the ex-slave Toussaint Bréda (later Toussaint L’Ouverture) decided to join in. At the age of 45, he was already known as “Old Toussaint.”¹⁶

⁷ Dubois, *Avengers*, 53.

⁸ Dubois, *Avengers*, 48.

⁹ James, *Black Jacobins*, 20.

¹⁰ Dubois, *Avengers*, 51. James, *Black Jacobins*, 21.

¹¹ Shoatz, “The Dragon and the Hydra.” Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 99-100.

¹² James, *Black Jacobins*, 88.

¹³ James, *Black Jacobins*, 88.

¹⁴ James, *Black Jacobins*, 88-89.

¹⁵ Shoatz, “The Dragon and the Hydra.”

¹⁶ James, *Black Jacobins*, 90.

Toussaint would become the major figure of the revolution due to his tactical brilliance. Toussaint came from the relatively privileged domestic sector of slaves.¹⁷

As the French Revolution went on, the Haitian revolution energized masses in Paris: “The slaves [...] had shown revolutionary France that they could fight and die for freedom.”¹⁸ By August 1792, Parisian masses opposed slavery. On 11 August, a colonial agent in France lamented, “One spirit alone reigns here, it is the horror of slavery and enthusiasm for liberty.”¹⁹

In January 1793, French rebels executed the king, and Spain and England declared war on France. Spanish invaders of Saint Domingue received mass support from Blacks who wanted to expel French slave masters, and Toussaint became a Spanish military officer.²⁰ Replacing his given slave name with Toussaint L’Ouverture, he remained loyal to the Spanish even after French Commissioner Sonthonax declared his support for the abolition of slavery and promised freedom to those who joined the French side.²¹

Ashley Smith explains L’Ouverture’s motivation for hesitating to join the French side:

Toussaint was not fooled by the Spanish, and his decision was certainly not the result of some African allegiance to kingship. It was a rational calculation. He knew that Sonthonax had no power to abolish slavery; that lay in the hands of the assembly, which had yet to prove itself an ally of the slaves.²²

In 1794, France’s National Convention officially abolished slavery in the French colonies. When he heard this news, L’Ouverture declared his allegiance with France.²³ As L’Ouverture accumulated substantial authority over the country, of the colony’s inhabitants grew impatient of his judgment.

L’Ouverture, Dessalines, and Revolts

L’Ouverture appointed prominent whites to top government posts, and he enacted harsh regulations and forced labor.²⁴ Even after Britain withdrew in 1798 and after the French dictator Napoleon seized power, L’Ouverture remained loyal to France. Shoatz argues, “Thus at one swell swoop, these leaders had been forced to play the role of neo-colonial compradors.”²⁵ As many Blacks worried about the possible reinstitution of chattel slavery, L’Ouverture himself acquired multiple plantations.²⁶ Former white masters now became employers, and the Black workers were legally forbidden from changing plantations or occupations.²⁷

¹⁷ Matthew Quest, “On ‘Both Sides’ of the Haitian Revolution?: Rethinking Direct Democracy and National Liberation in the Black Jacobins” in *The Black Jacobins Reader*, eds. Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 239.

¹⁸ James, *Black Jacobins*, 121.

¹⁹ James, *Black Jacobins*, 120.

²⁰ James, *Black Jacobins*, 124.

²¹ James, *Black Jacobins*, 129.

²² Ashley Smith, “The Black Jacobins: A review of C.L.R. James’s classic account of Haiti’s slave revolt,” *International Socialist Review* 63, <https://isreview.org/issue/63/black-jacobins/>.

²³ James, *Black Jacobins*, 141-143.

²⁴ James, *Black Jacobins*, 156-157.

²⁵ Shoatz, “The Dragon and the Hydra.”

²⁶ Dubois, *Avengers*, 189.

²⁷ Quest, “On ‘Both Sides,’” 243-5.

In 1795, plantation workers rose up against L'Ouverture, setting harvests on fire and killing several managers. They even shot L'Ouverture in the leg, before being suppressed.²⁸ In February 1796, more plantation workers revolted.²⁹

A skilled fighter appointed by L'Ouverture to command the North Province, General Moïse became the adopted nephew of L'Ouverture. Still, Moïse had strong misgivings about the ongoing exploitation of Blacks. He remarked, "Whatever my old uncle may do, I cannot bring myself to be the executioner of my colour."³⁰ On 22 and 23 September 1801, Blacks in many areas rose up with the cry, "Long live Moïse" and killed several hundred whites. Toussaint responded by executing Moïse on 21 November.³¹

Toussaint's chief lieutenant Jean Jacques Dessalines approached French General Charles Leclerc and suggested that he be put in charge.³² Sure enough, Leclerc arrested Toussaint, who was taken to France where he died in prison. Dessalines took leadership of the Haitian army.

As Haitians fought to expel the French, military strength came from below, from the local districts. James writes: "Derance, Samedi Smith, Jean Panier, and other nameless petty chieftains, North, South and West, each in his own district summoned the blacks to revolt [...] The masses were fighting and dying as only revolutionary masses can [...] the women were now fighting side by side with the men."³³

Staying loyal to the French, Dessalines and other generals hunted down and arrested many of these these rebels. Dessalines even invited the rebels Charles and Sanite Belair for a meeting, ostensibly about the possibility of joining forces against the French, and at the meeting Dessalines had them arrested and delivered to Leclerc.³⁴

In October of 1802, Dessalines finally defected from the French.³⁵ Haitians expelled France in 1804, and Dessalines declared himself emperor for life.

In early 1805, Dessalines ordered a massacre of remaining whites in Haiti. James criticizes this move:

The massacre of the whites was a tragedy; not for the whites. For these old slave-owners, those who burnt a little powder in the arse of a Negro, who buried him alive for insects to eat, who were well treated by Toussaint, and who, as soon as they got the chance, began their old cruelties again; for these there is no need to waste one tear or one drop of ink. The tragedy was for the blacks and the Mulattoes. It was not policy but revenge, and revenge has no place in politics. The whites were no longer to be feared, and such purposeless massacres degrade and brutalise a population, especially one which was just beginning as a nation and had so bitter a past. The people did not want it—all they wanted was freedom and independence seemed to promise that. Christophe and other generals strongly disapproved. Had the British and the Americans thrown their weight on the side of humanity, Dessalines might have been curbed, As it was Haiti suffered terribly from the resulting isolation. Whites were

²⁸ Dubois, *Avengers*, 189.

²⁹ Dubois, *Avengers*, 190.

³⁰ James, *Black Jacobins*, 275.

³¹ James, *Black Jacobins*. 277-278. Dubois, *Avengers*, 247.

³² James *Black Jacobins*, 333.

³³ James, *Black Jacobins*, 337, 346.

³⁴ James, *Black Jacobins*, 346.

³⁵ Dubois, *Avengers*, 288-9.

banished from Haiti for generations, and the unfortunate country, ruined economically, its population lacking in social culture, had its inevitable difficulties doubled by this massacre.³⁶

As emperor, Dessalines proved to be “a cruel tyrant over the Haitian people.” He was assassinated within a few years.³⁷

Reflecting on the revolution, Shoatz contrasts the ambivalent role of the centralized “dragon” forces with the consistently revolutionary role of the decentralized “hydra” forces:

Thus, we can see how Haiti’s dragon forces played a very ambivalent role in the rebel fight for independence: They started out as tenacious and brilliant fighters [...] During the course of the revolutionary struggle, they all opportunistically switched to the French imperialist’s side, and went on to attempt to drown the still revolutionary masses and their decentralized group in blood; hoping that way the French would allow them to serve as a new elite class of African policemen against a re-enslaved African worker’s class.

Failing to suppress the rebels, the dragon forces rejoined the hydra elements and lent their [weight] to totally defeating the French, only to once again turn against the revolutionary masses by establishing themselves as a dictatorial and exploitative African elite.

For its part, the decentralized hydra forces never veered from their objectives of winning as much freedom from servitude and oppression as possible. From the pre-revolutionary times of Mackandal, up through the 1791-1804 Haitian revolutionary war, and even down to our time, they’ve known that in addition to fighting the French during their revolution, they were also under attack by Toussaint’s dragon forces, who displayed hatred and fear of everything from their refusal to relinquish their maroon/decentralized organizational formations, to their practice of their traditional Vodum spiritual systems, the latter which did a great deal to inspire their soldiers to martyr themselves to the cause of freedom.

Then, after being pushed to the side after the French were driven out, the decentralized hydra elements were forced to—again—go underground and eventually morph into semi-secret Vodum societies that until today remain a little recognized or understood autonomous element amongst the oppressed Haitians.³⁸

³⁶ James, *Black Jacobins*, 373-4.

³⁷ Shoatz, “The Dragon and the Hydra.”

³⁸ Shoatz, “The Dragon and the Hydra.”

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