

THE PEARL OF THE ANTILLES: A SERIAL HISTORY OF HAITI



PART II

INSURRECTION TO INDEPENDENCE

Michael S. VanHook
International Strategic Alliances



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INTRODUCTION	4
PART II: INSURRECTION TO INDEPENDENCE	7
1. BOIS CAÏMAN CEREMONY	8
2. REVOLUTION	12
3. “THE OPENER OF THE WAY”	21
4. NAPOLEON VS. TOUSSAINT	33
5. INDEPENDENCE	43
6. REVERBERATIONS	49
APPENDIXES	
APPENDIX A: History of Haiti Timeline (1492 – 2010)	51
APPENDIX B: Tale of Two Revolutions (1789 – 1804)	52
APPENDIX C: Letter by the French Minister of the Marine to the Fort De Joux Commandant (1802)	54
APPENDIX D: Toussaint Louverture’s Letter to Napoleon Bonaparte From Fort De Joux (1802)	56
APPENDIX E: The History of Haiti’s Flag	57
BIBLIOGRAPHY	60
Resources	60
Images	65
AUTHOR	68

INTRODUCTION

“Haiti is the hardest country in the world to help.” –Gerald A. Drew¹

On a starlit night, Jean, Carlos, Denis, Keryl, and I stood on the water’s edge of the Bay of Cap-Haitien. We had just returned from Port-au-Prince after spending several days assessing the earthquake’s damage and searching for possible avenues to ship humanitarian aid. Everyone’s nerves sighed a great sense of relief for having safely returned from the aftershocks to our northern point of departure. All of us were still attempting to comprehend what we had just witnessed. As we talked, laughed, and even prayed, Jean said something to me that I’ll never forget. He remarked, “I consider you Haitian because you treat us as equals.”

My heart melted. This was the greatest compliment that I have ever received from all my years of working in Haiti. It resonated with my hopes that the Haitian people would know that I loved them and desired to serve them as my brothers and sisters. It also recognized to a small degree that our successful collaborations were accomplishing our vision.

Haiti is a land of distinct contrasts. Its beauty was once renowned as the “Pearl of the Antilles.” The first European visitors were captivated by Hispaniola’s lush forests and floral vegetation. Today with only one percent of the land forested, it stands on the brink of an ecological disaster as its mountains erode into the sea. The European powers once craved and bled for Haiti’s wealth as it produced nearly two-thirds of France’s commercial interests and forty percent of its foreign trade. Today, the lonely western half of Hispaniola is one of the poorest countries anywhere in the world and the most impoverished in the Western Hemisphere with eighty percent of its people living in abject poverty. Haiti’s independence was snatched from the cruelest forms of slavery instituted in the New World by a bloody revolution where unimagined atrocities were employed, and it yielded a government that has oppressed and brutalized its people for over 200 years. Yet the Haitian people are some of the most hospitable and kind people despite their suffering. They hold a deep place in my heart.

¹ R. D. Heinl, N. G. Heinl, & M. Heinl, *Written in Blood: The Story of the Haitian People 1492-1995* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1996, revised and expanded edition), 586.

I am constantly asked, “Why is Haiti like this, and what can be done?” I am convinced that the deep roots of many of these problems, and some of the plausible solutions, can best be understood by probing their historical lines into the present. Haiti’s history teaches us to appreciate its resilient heritage and its distinct culture. It also helps to recognize some of the “why’s” and the “what’s.”

John Chandler, a visiting Englishman, wrote in 1842 that. “The history of Hayti has yet to be written.”² Until *Written in Blood* was penned by Robert and Nancy Heintz in 1978, no complete history of Haiti existed in any language. As noted in the revised introduction to their book, “The rebel slaves who founded Haiti were largely illiterate or semiliterate. They kept no public records.”³ Most of the national historical documents have been destroyed, dispersed, or stolen. Therefore, “documentation of Haitian history in the conventional way from internal primary sources and national archives is an impossibility.”⁴

Penning a history of Haiti presents unique challenges. I have written this serial history to educate individuals or groups who are traveling to Haiti with my organization, International Strategic Alliances, or other organizations serving the Haitian people. It is my hope that understanding their history will facilitate new perspectives and greater compassion and solution-building.

I have attempted to provide a document that is both readable and accurate. The content is presented in smaller narrative vignettes with accompanying images so that one can navigate easily through the various stages. Every attempt has been made to present data that has stood the test of time and historical scrutiny, though as previously noted, primary sources are in short supply.

This project comes from a deep place in my heart for Haitian people. They live inside of me every day, and because of them, I’ve changed. They have my sincerest gratitude for their years of friendship and service. Particular distinction goes to **Pastor Bruno Cherenfant**, my constant companion, advocate, and on-the-ground instructor. Without him, my work would not be as effective or joyful.

In addition, I appreciate those who have raised me for this work. Special recognition goes to **Gregg Shaffer**, who planted the seed and guided me on those initial, extraordinary journeys, **David Michel**, “my Jimo,” who continuously grows the vision and gently corrects my paths, and **Wendell Mettey**, who mentored me in non-profit leadership. The **International Strategic Alliances Board of Directors** has been

² Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 7.

³ Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 7.

⁴ Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 8.

faithful to me even when they didn't have a clue where I was taking them—thank you, David, Mark, Deb, Doug, Gregg, Keryl, and Jerry. All of this would not be possible without the financial contributions, encouragement, and prayers of our partners. Thank you for making my dreams come true.

Last of all to my wife, Luciana (“*eu te amo*”) and my daughters, Megan, Lauren, and Chelsea, I hope one day you'll better understand my obsessions and join me in watching the sunset on the Bay of Fort-Liberte.

Michael S. VanHook, March 2010



Bay of Fort-Liberte

PART II
INSURRECTION TO
INDEPENDENCE



Chapter 1

BOIS CAÏMAN CEREMONY

August 1791

The giver of the blow forgets, the bearer of the scar remembers. -Haitian proverb



Bois Caïman Ceremony



The Haitian Revolution was a transformative historical event that altered the foundations of nineteenth-century institutions on a global scale. The revolution confronted the brutal trans-Atlantic slave trade that had propelled prosperous European and American plantation economies. The geopolitical landscape of the Americas was altered by expelling British and French claims in the Caribbean while launching a massive refugee movement throughout the New World. It challenged the scope of Enlightenment ideals that had declared that “men are born free and equal in rights.” Haiti’s revolution stands as the largest and only successful slave rebellion in world history and presented a powerful example of hope for emancipation to enslaved people around the world. From the ashes of the world’s wealthiest colony emerged the first black republic and the second independent nation in the western hemisphere. Today, it remains a pivotal and defining facet of Haitian society.

The combustible mixture of racial hatreds, a burgeoning number of runaway slaves, and the growing independence movements in France and Saint-Domingue needed only a spark to ignite an uprising. The spark was lit on August 14, 1791.

Under the cover of night, during a raging storm, hundreds of slaves stole away from their plantations to the remote wooded ground known as **Bois Caïman** (the Alligator Wood). **Dutty Boukman**, a marron and Vodou Houngan (High Priest), convened the rebellion leaders for a Petwo Vodou ceremony. Boukman’s giant, powerful build and grotesque facial features that looked like an exaggerated African carving commanded undisputed fidelity from the assembled. His fierceness made him an inspiring leader.



“A woman at the service was possessed by Ogoun, the Vodou warrior spirit . . . speaking the voice of the spirit, named those who were to lead the slaves and marrons to revolt and seek a stark justice from their white oppressors.”⁵ The ceremony was marked by flashes of lightning, incantations, and the participants formally swearing death to all whites. As drums beat a hypnotic rhythm, the Vodou priestess led the worshippers in sacred chants. A black

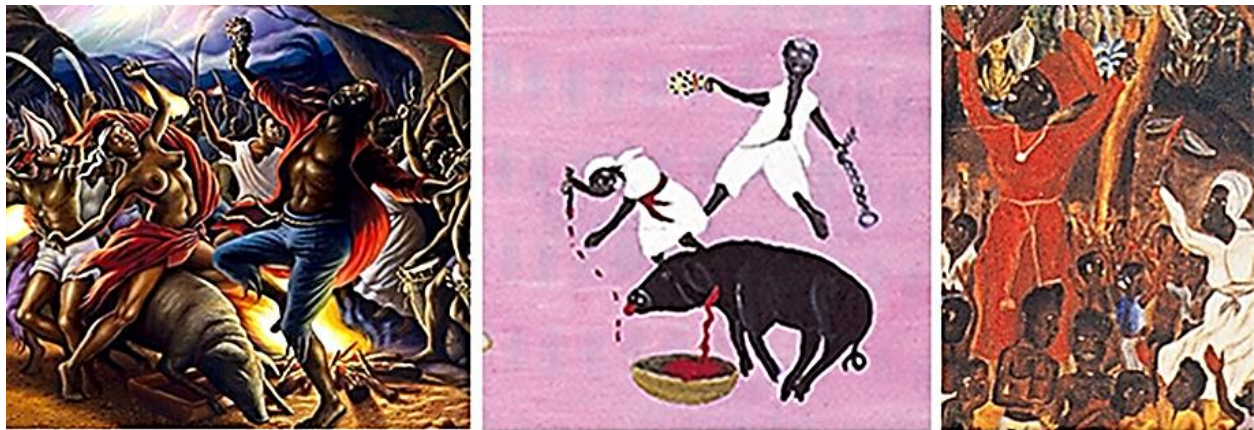
⁵ Robert Corbett, “The Haitian Revolution of 1791-1803: An Historical Essay in Four Parts,” <http://www.websteruniv.edu/~corbetre/haiti/history/revolution/revolution1.htm>, 8-9.

pig was sacrificed, and everyone drank its warm blood. Then, Boukman, with his voice roaring above the storm, called upon the assembled slaves to rise up against their masters. His prayer of exhortation has been passed down through the generations:

The god who created the sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, though hidden in the clouds, he watches us. He sees all that the white man does. The god of the white man inspires him with crime, but our god calls upon us to do good works. Our god who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has so often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all.⁶

Word spread rapidly of this historic and prophetic religious service and the maroons and slaves readied themselves for a major assault on the whites. This uprising which would not ever be turned back began on the evening of August 21st. The whole northern plain surrounding Cape Français was in flames. Plantation owners were murdered, their women raped and killed, children slaughtered, and their bodies mounted on poles to lead the slaves. It was an incredibly savage outburst.⁷

Soon after the Revolution began, Boukman was captured; his body was burned and his head was publicly displayed on a pike, in an attempt to shrink his invincibility. However, his influence remained strong, and Haitians later honored him by admitting him into the pantheon of loa (Vodou spirits).



PAINTING MYSTERY AND MEMORY: BOIS CAÏMAN IN VISUAL ART

⁶ “Boukman,” The Louverture Project, <http://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Boukman>, 19 July 2009. “The Boukman Rebellion,” *The Louverture Project*, https://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=The_Boukman_Rebellion, 13 June 2011.

⁷ Corbett, Part 1, 8-9.

Dutty Boukman and the Bois Caïman ceremony⁸ have had an enduring influence forming a dominant motif of Haiti's national identity. Conversely, some Christian sources have characterized the event as a "pact with the devil," and even many Haitians believe the country is "cursed" because of it.



Late Night Campfire Song of Weary Slaves

*“Eh! Eh! Bomba! Heu! Heu!
Canga, bafio te! Canga, do ki la! Canga, li!”*

*“We swear to destroy the whites and all they possess;
let us die rather than fail to keep this vow.”⁹*

⁸ Antoine Dalmas, a plantation surgeon, wrote an account of the Bois Caïman ceremony before fleeing to the United States. The first published account appeared in 1824 by Haitian mixed-race writer Herald Dumesle in *Voyage dans le nord d'Hayti*, based on oral testimonies from locals and his visits to historical sites.

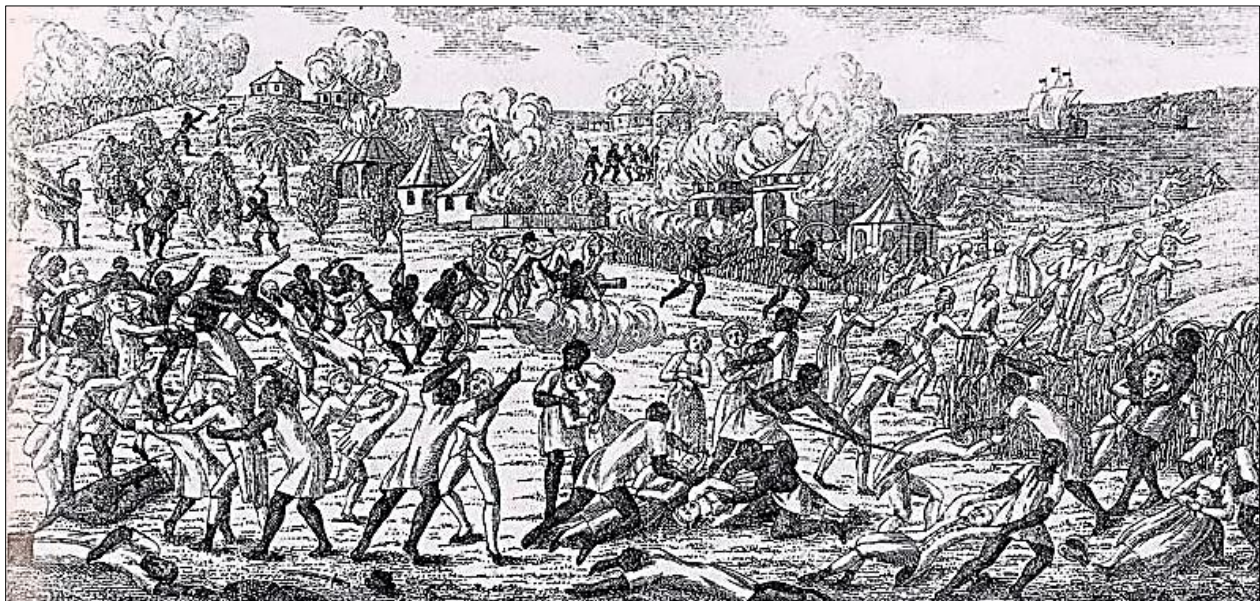
⁹ Elizabeth Abbott, *Haiti: The Duvaliers and Their Legacy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), 12-13.

Chapter 2

REVOLUTION

1791-1803

The dead do not know the value of white sheets. –Haitian proverb



“A bloody, thirteen-year revolution ensued, a complex web of wars among and between slaves, whites, free people-of-color, France, Spain and Britain that would eventually create the first independent black nation in the Western world.”¹⁰

¹⁰ “Africans in America: The Haitian Revolution,” WGBH PBS Online, Assessed May 9, 2009. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3p2990.html>.



In the initial days after the Boukman ceremony, slaves seized control of the northern half of Saint-Domingue and laid siege to Cape François (present-day Cap-Haitien). During the first eight days of the insurrection, 184 plantations were destroyed, and every plantation within fifty miles of Cape François was reduced to ashes and smoke. The prosperous, beautiful colony burned in flames, and more than a thousand whites were killed. Slaves and marrons across the land quickly joined the revolution, and their attacking ranks swelled to approximately 100,000 combatants. The whites controlled only a few isolated, fortified camps.

Many blacks were experienced soldiers who were captured and sold into slavery during the civil wars that tore apart the Kingdom of Kongo. They were knowledgeable in the use of firearms and introduced a different fighting tactic unfamiliar to European armies, guerilla warfare. Forming small autonomous bands, these guerilla fighters launched repeated attacks followed by swift retreats designed to confuse their adversaries. Instead of standing upright in an open position, they fired from prone positions behind obstacles. If they encountered resistance, they didn't waste their energies, but if they sensed hesitation, they became extremely audacious.¹¹

Barbarism was the order of the day as all sides committed atrocities. Plantation owners retaliated by massacring and torturing black prisoners. Cape François became a place of execution with gallows and wheels erected to administer gruesome retribution and torture. The British historian, Bryan Edwards, saw two slaves being broken by the executioner.

One of them expired on receiving the third stroke on his stomach, each of his legs and arms having first been broken in two places . . . The other had a harder fate. When the executioner lifted the instrument to give the finishing stroke on the breast . . . the mob, with the ferociousness of cannibals, called out "arretez" and compelled him to leave his work unfinished. In that condition, the miserable wretch, with broken limbs doubled up, was put on a cart-wheel, which was placed horizontally, one end of the axle-tree being driven into the earth. At the end of some forty minutes, some English seamen, who were spectators of the tragedy, strangled him in mercy.¹²

Boukman was succeeded by Jeannot, a ferocious man known for the ghastly torture that he administered on his victims. Sickened by his savageries, the two other slave commanders, George Biassou and Jean-François Papillon, executed him and displayed

¹¹ Dubois, 109.

¹² Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 44.

his corpse on a meat hook. Biassou, in his own manner, was renowned for collecting skulls, cats, snakes, and other African fetishes in his camp.



It was a war of extermination. The decades-old racial prejudices and animus that had pitted the grand blancs, petit blancs, mulattoes, and blacks against each other intensified in this frantic fight for survival. There was no room for neutrality. As the violence between whites and blacks advanced across the fertile northern plain, the intense racial hatred of the free-people-of-color against both races ignited. In the West, the mulatto armies massacred whites for not supporting the granting of political rights by the republic. “White ears were sliced off and worn as cockades; live infants were thrown as food to hogs, and the bellies of pregnant women were ripped open.”¹³ The notorious, northern mulatto commander, Candy, plucked out his victims’ eyes with a corkscrew.

The accounts of these horrors were soon widely disseminated in the Americas and Europe. One well-known account presented before the National Assembly described the rebels carrying the body of an impaled white child upon a stake as their battle standard. Within a couple of months, the slaves had killed 2,000 whites, and an estimated 10,000 slaves were killed through fighting and executions.

¹³ Heintl, Heintl, and Heintl, 50.

The contentious relationship between the whites and free-people-of-color in the South and West grew more perplexing. A few whites considered allegiances with the free-persons-of-color as a necessary sacrifice compared to losing the entire colony and their fortunes. The mulattoes were well-armed, organized, and acclimated to the climate that had decimated many European troops. But many radical whites, particularly the *petit blancs*, firmly resisted any alliances with their historical adversaries.

The free-people-of-color in the Western Province needed allies, so they promised black slaves freedom in return for their service. These volunteers became known as the “Swiss,” in reference to former Swiss mercenaries for the King of France.

In the south and west. . . there was a union of people-of-color and slaves, and they were menacing the whole region. A contingent of white soldiers marched out of Port-au-Prince, but they were soundly defeated. Then, the revolutionaries marched on Port-au-Prince. However, the free people-of-color did not want to defeat the whites; they wanted to join them. And, more importantly, they didn't want to see the slaves succeed and push for emancipation. Consequently, they offered a deal to the whites and joined forces with them, turning treacherously on their black comrades in arms.¹⁴

After being soundly crushed, many whites who had furiously resisted granting any political rights to the people-of-color were forced to rethink their intractable position. The leader of the *petit blancs* extended a hand of friendship to the free mulattoes:

We bring you finally words of peace; we come no longer to bargain with you, we come only to accord to you your demands, we come animated by the spirit of justice and peace to give authentic recognition of your rights, to ask you to see in the white citizens only friends and brothers whom the colony in danger invites you, begs you, to unite with, in order to bring prompt assistance to our troubles. . . . our courage has broken all obstacles, and we have imposed silence on all mean prejudices, on the petty desire for domination. . . . Let us henceforth be combatants only in zeal for the public welfare.¹⁵

The “Swiss” did not fare as well. The whites refused to grant any freedoms to the blacks and deported many of them to the Mosquito Coast (present-day Nicaragua and Honduras). The ship's captain tried unsuccessfully to sell them into slavery in Belize,

¹⁴ Corbett, 9.

¹⁵ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 2nd ed. 1989), 98-99.

then dumped them in Jamaica, where the British sent them back to Saint-Domingue. There they were imprisoned, executed, or died from sickness and starvation.¹⁶

Soon, the hatred between the whites and mulattoes overwhelmed their desire for collaboration. Violence again broke out in Port-au-Prince. The whites murdered the free-people-of-color civilians in the streets and their homes, forcing their army to retreat. As the slaughter raged, a fire broke out and razed eight hundred homes, reducing the city to a mound of ashes.

The political and military leader of the Southern Province, André Rigaud, called the free-people-of-color to respond to the brutality of the white “barbarians” with equal retribution. Hopelessly, all Saint-Domingue was engrossed in a war of total extermination.



¹⁶ Dubois, 121.

Across the Atlantic, word of the revolution had not reached the French National Assembly and King Louis XVI when they dispatched three civil commissioners in late November with decrees that only exasperated the divisions in the colony. The National Assembly proclaimed that the king would exercise control over the trade policies of the colonies; the local assemblies would decide the political status of people-of-color and blacks, and that the “Old Regime” had been replaced by a constitutional monarchy. It also decreed a general amnesty and forgiveness to those who returned to the former order.

Some of the revolutionary leaders contemplated the months of war and its toll. Sick and hungry, they wondered if they could sustain the struggle if troops from France arrived. In response to a decree for general amnesty and forgiveness, the slave leaders Jean-François and Biassou sued for peace. The French commissioners recognized that the only way to end the conflict was to offer the rebels amnesty. But these actions were repulsive to both the whites and persons-of-color as they demanded the continuation of slavery with their rule of Saint-Domingue. They recognized that if amnesty was granted, slavery would never be secure. The improbable attempt for an armistice was lost.

When the news of the revolution finally reached the National Assembly, they acknowledged that the only salvation for Saint-Domingue rested in granting equal and political rights to the free-persons-of-color and the free blacks. “The argument about free-colored’s political rights, as Robin Blackburn notes, “had been transformed by the sight of the smoke rising from burnt-out plantation buildings and cane fields.”¹⁷

On April 4, 1792, the National Assembly declared that the free-people-of-color and the free blacks must enjoy equal political rights with the whites. “From that day forward, there would be only two categories of people in the colonies, free and enslaved; and there would be no racial distinctions among the free. It was a dramatic step. In the heart of the slave societies of the Americas, legal distinctions on the basis of race were outlawed.”¹⁸

To enforce their decree, on April 29, 1792, the National Assembly dispatched three new commissioners, led by **Léger Félicité Sonthonax**, with 6,000 soldiers. This time, the commissioners would dissolve the local assemblies and use their



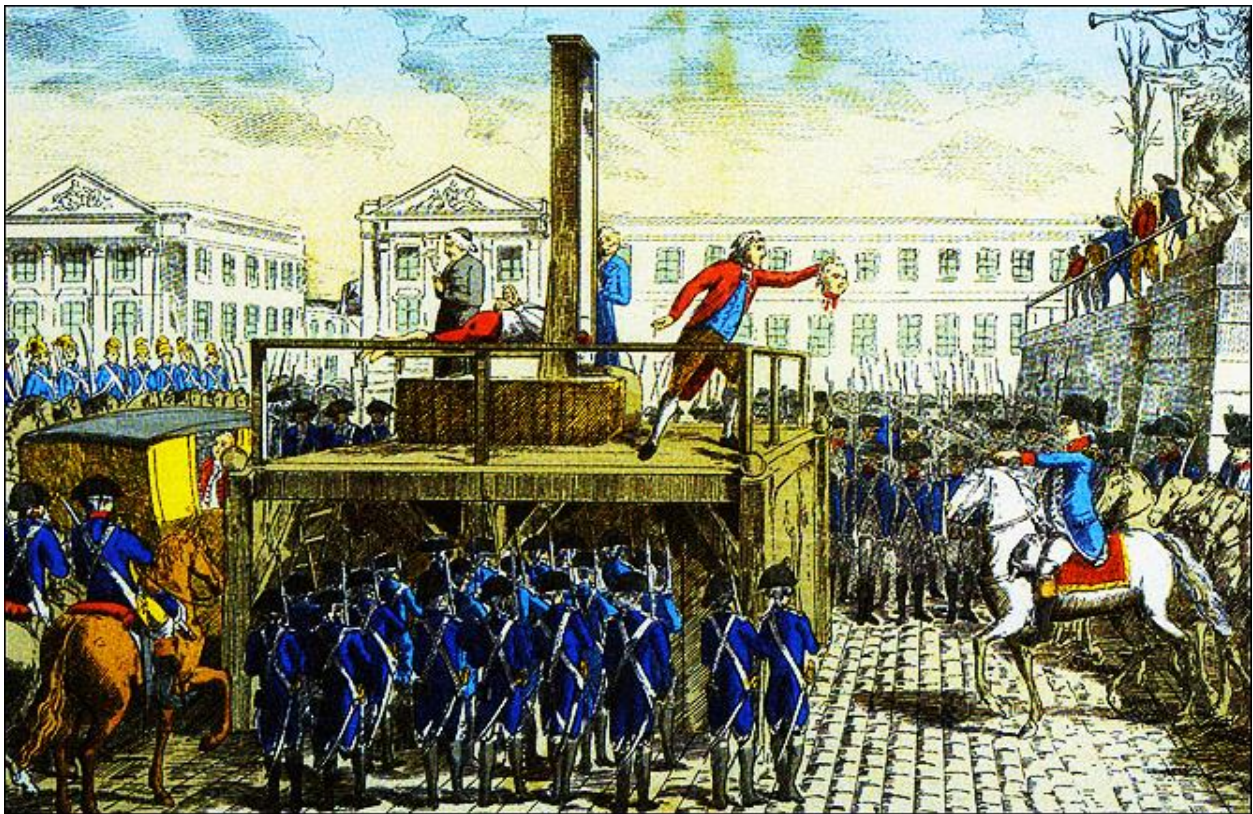
¹⁷ Dubois, 130.

¹⁸ Dubois, 130.

powers against the white planters. Consequently, the whites broke their alliances with the free-people-of-color.

When factions couldn't be more fractured, news from across the Atlantic threw everything into disarray. In September of 1792, the French Republic was proclaimed.

The plantation owners made agreements with Great Britain to declare British sovereignty over the island. Spain, which still controlled the eastern domain of Hispaniola, also joined the conflict with Great Britain against France. The Spanish invaded Saint-Domingue and were joined by the slave forces.



The beheading of Louis XVI was a catalyst to precipitate several simultaneous events. When the republic declared “war of all peoples on all kings,” the other nations responded. France found itself embroiled in conflicts against Britain, Spain, Holland, Prussia, Austria, and Portugal. Saint-Domingue was abandoned to determine its own fate. The slave officers did not trust the republic; and consequently, they pledged alliance to the King of Spain. Biassou and Jean-François were given fancy dress uniforms and commissioned into the Spanish military. As the blacks were being armed by the Spanish for an attack upon loyal French forces, the whites divided into independent and royalist factions. With foreign support, they re-opened their struggle against France's

newly formed republic, which had granted citizenship to the people-of-color. With France pre-occupied with the war in Europe, the British forces in Jamaica prepared to invade. Saint-Domingue would not be re-supplied or reinforced from France, leaving the colony isolated to resolve the outcome of their numerous conflicts with bloodshed and deception.

The perilous French grip on Saint-Domingue presented a tempting prize for the enemies of France. Britain and Spain reached an understanding to divide the island between themselves. The British invaded and captured Port-au-Prince and most of the other strategic ports. The Spaniards captured much of the North and the Upper Artibonite. By August 1793, French control over Saint-Domingue was precarious, at best. Only 3,500 French soldiers remained on the island.

To prevent a total military disaster, French commissioner Léger Félicité Sonthonax executed the revolutionary act of proclaiming freedom to the blacks who would fight for the republic. On August 29, 1793, he unilaterally decreed the emancipation of slavery in Saint-Domingue. *“Men are born and remain free and equal in rights: here is, citizens, the Gospel of France; it is more than time that it is proclaimed in all the departments of the Republic.”*¹⁹



¹⁹ “Memory of Léger-Félicité Sonthonax in Oyonnax,” Road of Abolitions, Mémoires des abolitions de l’Esclavage, 2017, <https://en.abolitions.org/index.php?IdPage=1552055343>.

All slaves, regardless of color or position, were declared free. Even more radical, they were granted the full rights of French citizenship. “Robert Stein, Sonthonax’s biographer, calls this, **‘the most radical step of the Haitian Revolution and perhaps even of the French Revolution.’**”²⁰ Bolstering the proclamation, the National Convention formally abolished all slavery in their colonies and granted civil and political rights to blacks on February 4, 1794. These actions were repulsive to both the whites and persons-of-color as they demanded the continuation of slavery with their rule of Saint-Domingue.

²⁰ Corbett, 15.

Chapter 3

“THE OPENER OF THE WAY”

1743 – 1803

Brothers and Friends, I am Toussaint Louverture.

My name is perhaps known to you. I am bent on vengeance. I want Liberty and Equality to reign in Saint-Domingue. I strive to bring them into existence. Unite with us, brothers, and fight with us in the common cause.

Your most obedient and humble servant, Toussaint Louverture (August 29, 1793)





The preeminent Haitian leader and the most intriguing figure to emerge during the Revolution was **Toussaint Louverture**.²¹ Louverture means, “The Opener of the Way.” Social historian James G. Leyburn noted that “what he did is more easily told than what he was.”²² Without question, his momentous accomplishments stand as a testament to his consummate abilities as a brilliant military general, diplomatic strategist, and the liberator of the Saint-Domingue. A question worthy of further consideration is what kind of nation Haiti would have become if his reign and grand plans had continued for years beyond.



Toussaint was a former slave and the son of an African prince. As a free black man living in Cape François, he was educated, learning French, geometry, and Latin. He practiced herbal and African healing, though he was not a Vodou houngan. Toussaint joined the rebels as a medical officer shortly after the rebellion began, but before he enlisted, he secured the safe expatriation of his master’s family for the humane treatment he had received. With his ability to organize, train, and lead men, Toussaint quickly rose through the ranks to become a general. A contemporary Haitian source benevolently describes him as:

A brilliant general and capable administrator, defeating British, Spanish, and French troops, emancipating the slave population, and overseeing the country’s initial attempts at reforming its political and social structure. His extraordinary efforts at reaching across lines of race and class set him apart from his contemporaries, and his vision of a race-blind, independent country of equals was ahead of his time. As skilled as he was on the battlefield, Toussaint was equally at ease manipulating the machinery of politics and diplomacy. Wise, intelligent, tireless, ascetic, pragmatic, opportunistic, fond of aesthetic pleasures, the man many called “Papa Toussaint” grew up taking care of plants and animals, and the theme of Toussaint as “father” or “caretaker” runs throughout his life story.²³

²¹ There are two spellings of his surname, Louverture and L’Ouverture. For most of this document, the former is written except when quoting directly from a source that uses the latter. As is common in Haiti, the given name, Toussaint, is most often spoken and written.

²² James G. Leyburn, *The Haitian People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941, out of print), 26.

²³ “Toussaint Louverture,” The Louverture Project, https://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Toussaint_Louverture, 2009.

French General Kererseau reinforced these accolades,

He is a man of great good sense, whose attachment to France cannot be doubted, whose religion guarantees morality, whose firmness equals his prudence, who enjoys the confidence of all colours, and who has on his own an ascendancy which nothing can counter-balance. With him you can do all; without him, you can do nothing.²⁴

“His Spanish superior officer had said that ‘God in this terrestrial globe could not commune with a purer spirit’; the Frenchman, Lacroix, remarked, ‘No one approaches him without fear, and no one leaves him without respect.’”²⁵

Admirers bestowed numerous lavish epithets upon Toussaint Louverture, hailing him as the Black Spartacus, the Father of Blacks, the Black Son of the French Revolution, the Black George Washington, the Negro King, the Bonaparte of the Caribbean, and the Hannibal of Saint-Domingue. Detractors shuddered that his magnetism would sway slaves in other colonies to revolt. Thomas Jefferson labeled him and his followers the cannibals of the terrible Republic, while others branded him the Robespierre of Saint-Domingue.

“Clearly, the turning point in this war and in all Haitian history was the return to the French side of Toussaint Louverture and eventually all his black and mulatto forces. . . . His change . . . made all the difference.”²⁶ Scholars have generated a great deal of speculation regarding Toussaint’s genuine motives for making the abrupt about-face in allegiance from the Spaniards. He did not leave a record. The two most plausible factors were his implacable principle of emancipation and his personal friendship with French general Laveaux.

First, Toussaint held an implacable conviction in the liberation of all Hispaniola’s slaves and the ideal of brotherhood. He believed, “Freedom is a right given by nature.”²⁷ Spain and Britain planned to restore slavery to the island. Toussaint had proposed the complete emancipation of all slaves and amnesty to the rebels, but the Spaniards rebuffed him. Simultaneously, his black auxiliary comrades in arms, the unscrupulous generals Jean-François and Biassou, continued to buy and sell slaves and were undermining his command. His superior leadership skills provoked jealous reprisals. When French Commissioner Sonthonax independently decreed the

²⁴ James, 203.

²⁵ Leyburn, 26.

²⁶ Corbett, 15-16.

²⁷ Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 1.

emancipation of slavery in Saint-Domingue, he believed it was more out of necessity than principle, though it had to have some influence to induce his pivot because the Spaniards had rejected his earlier appeal.

Secondly, Governor-General Etienne Maynaud de Laveaux had secretly promised Jean-François and Biassou that they would become French generals if they switched allegiances, but they rebuffed him. Secret communiqués were sent to Toussaint with similar promises made. Eventually, he recognized that Laveaux was sincere in his republicanism and the cause of black emancipation.

Relying on the first letters he received from Laveaux, Toussaint acknowledged that he had been ‘led into error’ by the Spaniards, ‘the enemy of the republic and of the human race’—but he also reminded Laveaux that the French had spurned his offer of alliance in 1793. He had been forced to turn to the Spaniards because they offered him and his combatants freedom and protection; he now realized, however, that the ‘contemptible monarchists’ had only wanted to divide and weaken the black citizens, so as eventually to bring them ‘back to servitude.’ Urging Laveaux to ‘forget the past,’ Toussaint pledged that he would henceforth be ‘wholly devoted to crushing the enemies of the republic.’²⁸

The two established a lasting friendship. Toussaint referred to Laveaux as his father, though he was five years younger. Laveaux referred to him as his ‘respectful son.’ Toussaint would draw upon Laveaux’s wide-read knowledge of European literature and military strategy, but most of all, he appreciated his ‘exceptional love for the black people’ and republican equality.²⁹

On May 6, 1794, in Marmelade, Toussaint joined the Spanish commandant for an early mass. When devotions concluded, he mounted his horse, drew his sword, unfurled the Tricolor of France, and his regiment cut the throats of the Spanish garrison.³⁰

Unfettered, Toussaint was now unhindered to unleash his military genius.

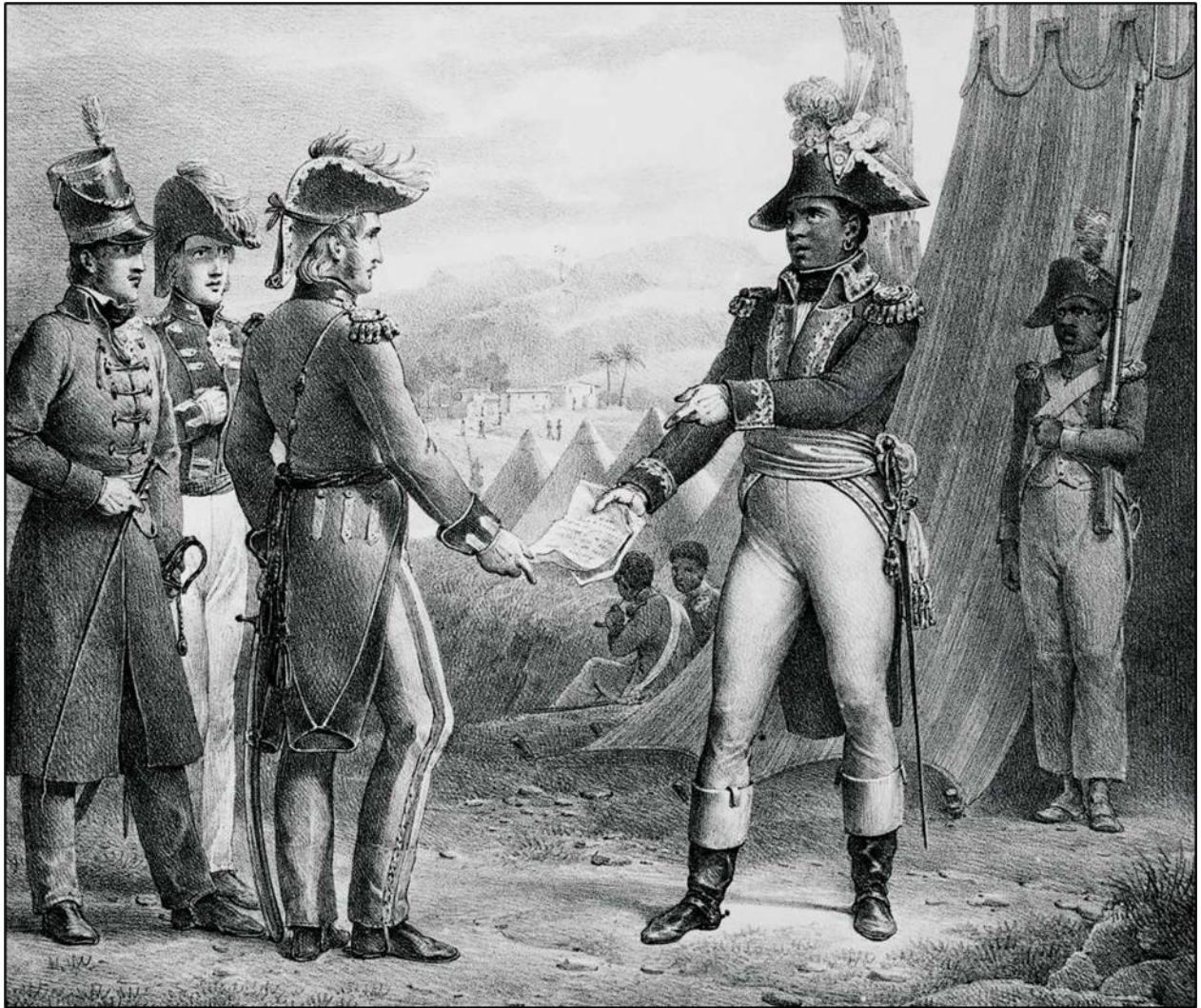


²⁸ Hazareesingh, 66-67.

²⁹ Hazareesingh, 67.

³⁰ Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 66.

His army fought a guerrilla war, and he was known for his lightning attacks, covering territory at seemingly impossible speeds. He attacked both Jean-François and Biassou, his former associates, and defeated them. He harassed the British, though he could not dislodge them from the coastal towns they held. One chronicler says: 'He disappears—he has flown—as if by magic. Now he reappears again where he is least expected. He seems to be ubiquitous. One never knows where his army is, what it subsists on, or how he manages his supplies and his treasury. He, on the other hand, seems perfectly informed concerning everything that goes on in the enemy camp.'³¹



Armistice with British Brigadier-General Maitland, 1798

³¹ Corbett, 15-16.

Quickly, he launched a swift offensive against his former allies, the Spanish, and inflicted heavy losses upon them. Jean-François and Biassou were forced to evacuate the island. When the French defeated the Spaniards in Europe, Spain signed a peace treaty ceding Santo Domingo over to them. Toussaint was promoted to a French brigadier general.

Turning his attention to the British, Toussaint commenced a fierce campaign with over 200 engagements in the opening months, forcing them out of most of the western provinces. By mid-1797, the British position was untenable as other forces intervened to determine the island's fate. The British troops were dreadfully decimated not by military might but from yellow fever. The disease annihilated entire units killing most and rendering the remaining unfit for service. British losses exceeded 14,000, a number greater than those who perished at Waterloo. On October 2, 1798, the British survivors left Saint-Domingue soil for the last time. Before departing, they signed an armistice, whereby Britain would not attack Saint-Domingue, and Toussaint would not meddle in Jamaican affairs.

With the British departure and French authority over Hispaniola in name only, only one threat endangered Toussaint's absolute power, **Andre Rigaud**, the leading mulatto military leader in the South. According to Toussaint, Rigaud's motives were a deep-seated hatred of the white population. In a published proclamation, he charged that his adversary aimed to exterminate the white population, break away from France, and re-enslave the blacks. Laveaux observed,



An abominable jealousy exists here among the gens de couleur against whites and blacks . . . the gens de couleur are in despair at seeing Toussaint Louverture, a noir, become brigadier general . . . All the gens de couleur and black affranchise [freedmen] are enemies of emancipation and equality. They cannot conceive that a former black slave can be the equal of a white man, a mulatre, or a black affranchi.³²

A vicious civil war known as the War of Knives commenced in June 1799 between the noir republican forces of Toussaint and the royalist, mulatto forces loyal to Rigaud. The intensity of the War of Knives increased with Rigaud's rebels carrying out murderous attacks against civilians. The reported atrocities included mass killings of white men, women, and children in the South and the massacre of opposition troops by

³² Heinl, Heinl, and Heinl, 69.

duplicity. The mixed-race army in Cap-Français staged a coup and imprisoned Governor Laveaux. When Toussaint rescued him, Laveaux rewarded the feat by naming Toussaint lieutenant governor over the colony.

On two separate occasions in Cap-Français and Les Cayes, Toussaint had the mulatto prisoners brought before him in the cathedrals. Mounting the pulpits, he preached a sermon of forgiveness, proclaimed amnesty, and had their fetters removed.

Rigaud's resistance ended with the fall of Jacmel on March 11, 1800, under assault from Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the besieging general loyal to Toussaint whose name would later become prominent in Haitian history. Rigaud fled to France. Upon conquering Saint-Domingue, Toussaint's first order of business was to order the executions of Rigaud's loyal sympathizers. Dessalines complied by the wholesale slaughter of 5,000 to 10,000 predominate mulattoes through mass tortures and executions. Toussaint responded, "I told him to prune the tree, not to uproot it."³³

On January 26, 1801, Toussaint entered the capital city of Santo Domingo and consolidated his power emerging as the undisputed leader to reign over the entire island of Hispaniola.



³³ Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 84.

Toussaint Louverture's meteoric ascension to power and phenomenal battleground accomplishments ranks him alongside the superb commanders in the annals of military conflict. Though he never received formal military training, he studied extensively, learned rapidly, and adapted his tactics to fit his troops and conditions. He prepared meticulous battle plans and gave explicit orders to subordinates. His constant movements terrorized opponents because they never knew where he was but always feared that he was close at hand, ready to suddenly strike with overpowering force.

His troops would follow him anywhere. His horsemanship, marksmanship, and swordsmanship skills were unmatched. He led by example, exemplified extraordinary feats of bravery as a frontline combatant, and suffered immensely alongside his troops. Dozens of horses were killed underneath him; he was seriously wounded seventeen times and lost his front teeth when a cannonball exploded near him. These mystical qualities reinforced the belief many of his troops held that he possessed supernatural powers given to him by the Vodou spirits.

He taught his officers that "a good soldier should appear cold from the outside, and be methodical, loyal and fiery inside,"³⁴ which was exactly what he modeled. British soldier Marcus Rainsford marveled at the creativeness of Toussaint's army conducting a military drill.

Each general officer had a demi-brigade . . . [They] performed equally well several manoeuvres applicable to their method of fighting. At a whistle a whole brigade ran three or four hundred yards, then separating, threw themselves flat on the ground, changing to their backs or sides, keeping up a strong fire the whole time, till they were recalled; they then formed again, in an instant, into their wonted regularity.³⁵

Toussaint instilled a strict discipline in his troops, trained them in rudimentary fighting tactics, and unlike his rebel and European opponents, engendered a code of honorable conduct. One of his cardinal regulations was a prohibition against pillaging. Violating this rule was punishable by death. His soldiers strictly obeyed this command and demonstrated numerous acts of virtue, which allayed the fears of residents in occupied cities. Historian and French general Pamphile de Lacroix, a later opponent, praised their discipline:

Officers commanded, pistols in hand, and had the power of life and death over their subordinates. It was remarkable to see these Africans with bare torsos and equipped only with cartridge pouch, sword and musket, give an example of perfect self-control . . . When quartered in a town, they would not touch any

³⁴ Hazareesingh, 68.

³⁵ Hazareesingh, 77.

provisions displayed in the markets or brought in by the cultivators. They trembled before their officers and were respected by the people. To have succeeded in disciplining these barbarians was Toussaint's supreme triumph.³⁶

When confronted with severe deprivations, Toussaint repeatedly reminded his officers and soldiers that their struggle for emancipation was just. The principle of "fraternity" was also a central, unifying feature of his military command; whereby, all races were equal and worked together. Senior officers advanced through the ranks regardless of their race, solely due to their battlefield exploits and leadership qualities. His inner circle included blacks, both Creoles and Kongos,³⁷ persons-of-color, and white Europeans. "Toussaint's reputation as a compassionate and generous leader, especially among the European colon population, as one French administrator noted, the black general was widely admired for his 'extreme humanity towards the white species.'" ³⁸

Racial tensions still bred mistrust and bitter hatreds. Toussaint's gracious manner and policies of reconciliation sought to unite the island's peoples. Once when some blacks came to him saying they did not wish to obey either the whites or mulattoes, "Toussaint took a glass of wine and a glass of water, mixed them together and showed the result. 'How can you tell which is which? We must all live together.' They went away satisfied."³⁹

Elevated to governor-general and commander-in-chief of Saint-Domingue, Toussaint proved to be equally adept at manipulating political machinery and managing domestic affairs. Through shrewd maneuvering, he expelled Directory envoys Sonthonax, Hédouville, and Roume one by one and isolated other opponents. To maintain the fragile loyalties throughout the colony, he nurtured and relied on a devoted network of civil administrators that provided him with valuable, confidential information.

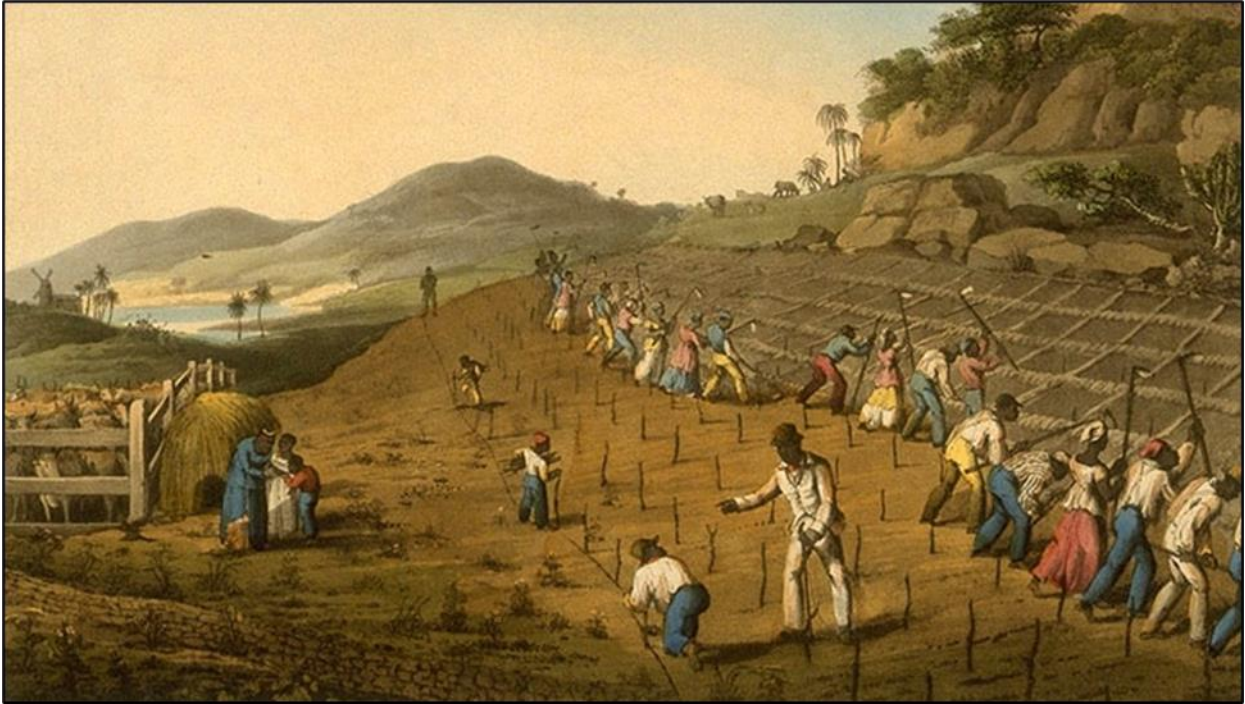
In a remarkable diplomatic feat, Toussaint endeared himself to the Adam's administration of the young republic to the north while balancing the volatile relations between France and Great Britain. The United States provided weapons, ammunition, and naval support during his war against Rigaud.

³⁶ Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 80.

³⁷ Creoles denoted those born in Saint-Domingue, while Kongos denoted those born in Africa. Tensions often existed between these two groups.

³⁸ Hazareesingh, 160.

³⁹ James, 252.



A monumental undertaking lay before Toussaint. In the wake of ten years of war, Saint-Domingue was in utter ruins. A French staff officer calculated that the white population of the colony had been reduced by at least two-thirds, the persons-of-color by one quarter, and the blacks by over a third. The plantations and the irrigation system, upon which the economy once flourished, were wretched. The trained population, who possessed technical skills and knew how to manage the economy, had long since fled to safer lands. As for the labor force, the noir slaves, upon whose backs the colony prospered, fled to freedom as maroons. Toussaint recognized that the salvation of Saint-Domingue lay in the restoration of agriculture. One of his reoccurring motifs was “without cultivation, there is no commerce; and without commerce, there is no colony.”⁴⁰

To restart the economic production of sugar, coffee, cotton, and indigo, he imposed a system whereby the state assumed control over abandoned plantations and leased them to senior army officers and public officials. “‘Work is necessary,’ he proclaimed, ‘it is a virtue, it is for the general good of the state.’”⁴¹ Similar to the medieval feudal system, workers became tenants and were paid a quarter of the revenue and the state received the rest. When Governor General Laveaux visited Toussaint in the Petite-Riviere parish he saw “the satisfying spectacle of more than 15,000 laborers back to work, all full of gratitude to the republic: blacks, whites, Mulattoes, laborers,

⁴⁰ Hazareesingh, 164.

⁴¹ James, 155-156.

proprietor—all blessing the virtuous chief whose care maintained among them order and peace.”⁴²

The effect of Toussaint’s regulations on agricultural output was immediate, leading to tenfold increases in specific plantations; overall there was a surge in sugar and coffee production, which rose to a third of their 1789 levels by end of the year 1801; a year later, cotton exports were up nearly 60 per cent of their pre-revolutionary levels, and a report the French government estimated that Toussaint’s revenues from cargo taxes alone were in excess of 20 million francs for 1801. In strictly economic terms, the governor’s plantation system proved to be ‘remarkably efficient.’ But . . . it came at a political cost.⁴³

But the paternalistic plan cultivated resentment among many black cultivators who perceived the labor policy as a return to slavery. Though vagrancy was harshly punished, in certain districts, there were more marrons than before 1791.⁴⁴

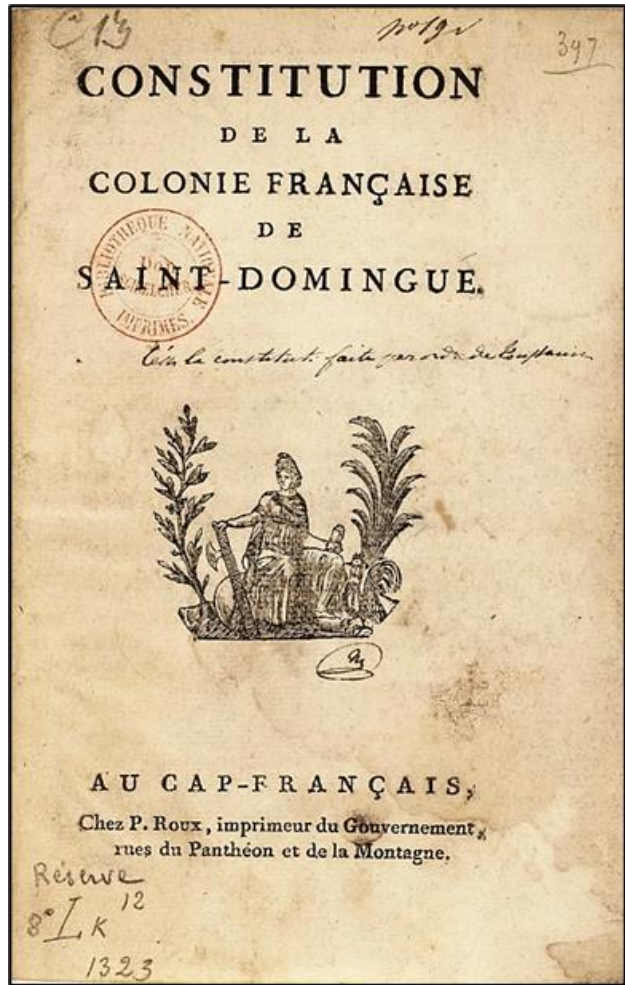
In ten astonishing years, the former slave had left the plantation, expelled foreign troops from Saint-Domingue, established himself as the commander-in-chief, dismissed successive French envoys, conquered Santo Domingo, and unified the island under his rule. Wide-ranging enthusiasm existed for Toussaint across the Hispaniola and beyond.

On July 26, 1801, Toussaint Louverture embarked upon another audacious adventure that would provoke fateful consequences; he published an autocratic constitution for Saint-Domingue. The principal articles centralized all power in him, named himself governor-general for life, abolished slavery and color lines, specified Roman Catholicism as the state religion, recognized the centrality of sugar plantations to Saint-Domingue’s economy, proclaimed loyalty to France, and ascribed to himself the right to name his successor.

⁴² James, 157-158.

⁴³ Hazareesingh, 280.

⁴⁴ Hazareesingh, 277.

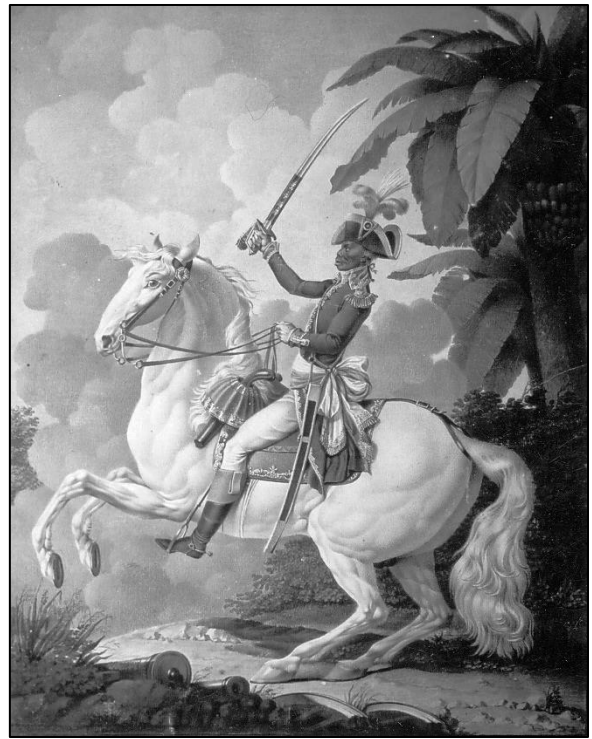


Chapter 4

NAPOLEON VS. TOUSSAINT

1801 – 1803

A lovely smile may not be that of a friend. –Haitian proverb





Many brilliant leaders have been blinded by the unseen shadow of their own hubris. It can be argued that Toussaint ultimately capitulated to it as well. Underneath his triumphs, unrest was stirring with a few of his trusted black military officers, some of whom believed that Toussaint was becoming too authoritarian and deferential to the whites. To his absolute shock, one of these was his favorite nephew and trusted general, Moïse Louverture, who staged an unsuccessful uprising to exterminate the whites. When the cabal was uncovered, Moïse was arrested, tried, and executed.

Sudhir Hazareesingh, in his astute biography, *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture*, cites several points where Toussaint's prodigious achievements set in motion animosity and plots against him. When Toussaint rescued Laveaux and was elevated as his deputy, "Historians . . . viewed this moment as a turning point. . . . Pamphile de Lacroix saw it as a 'death blow for the authority of metropolitan France; it is from this declaration that the end of white rule and the birth of black power can be dated.'"⁴⁵

One of the defining moments in the history of colonial Saint-Domingue was Toussaint's expulsion of the Directory agent Gabriel de Hédouville in October 1798, barely six months after he had arrived to take up his post. This episode confirmed the steady consolidation of Toussaint's power in the wake of the departure of Laveaux in 1796 and the elimination of Sonthonax a year earlier. From then on, he seemed more able—and willing—openly to challenge the authority of France. The Black Spartacus was becoming more assertive, and his horizons were beginning to broaden.⁴⁶

Once he [Hédouville] arrived in Saint-Domingue and took the full measure of Toussaint's power, the French agent realized that it was not limited to the military sphere but had spilled over into all sectors of the civil administration, including the entire system of local government. As he indicated in an early report: 'The assemblies in the countryside are made up of men from the plantations who are incapable of taking any decisions for themselves, and who allow themselves to be completely directed by Toussaint's regional military commanders. When I arrived, I found all the judicial, civil and military powers in the hands of Toussaint as well, and he had also reduced the justices of peace and the municipalities to positions of complete insignificance.'⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Hazareesingh, 99.

⁴⁶ Hazareesingh, 127.

⁴⁷ Hazareesingh, 133-134.

An anonymous report sent to the French government from Saint-Domingue shortly after Hedouville's departure noted that Toussaint's hold over the population was like 'a form of magic power': the colony was now clearly under his spell. This force could be used 'either to contain it or to push it towards revolution.' Yet, it concluded for all his flaws, Toussaint remained the only man who could guarantee that the colony remains in French hands.⁴⁸

Toussaint's divine aura was forged when municipal authorities in Port-au-Prince welcomed him as the liberator of Saint-Domingue and handed him a medal bearing the inscription 'After God, it is him.'⁴⁹

The tide turned against Toussaint. France's chaotic transformation from a monarchy to a republic and its weakened governance in Saint-Domingue had worked to Toussaint's advantage by providing him the leniency to act independently. But the ascension of **Napoleon Bonaparte** to First Consul coalesced the authority and direction of the state into the inclinations and prejudices of one man.

On October 1, 1801, Great Britain and France signed an armistice to cease hostilities. Napoleon was now free to deal with Toussaint and Saint-Domingue. With the peril of British naval superiority removed, the Atlantic passageway was wide open for a French military expedition. Napoleon had been planning an invasion and overthrow of Toussaint for quite some time; he feared Toussaint would lead Saint-Domingue away from France and the island's immense wealth. He required Hispaniola as a base for operations to restore France's colonial dominance in the rest of the Caribbean and North America. Britain and the United States feared that if Napoleon controlled Saint-Domingue, his armies would attack Louisiana and sweep up the Mississippi.

Another motive that cannot be ignored was Napoleon's intense racial prejudice. He personally despised Toussaint, calling him "this gilded African." Napoleon bluntly told the Minister of the Navy, "I am for the whites, because I am white; I have no other reason, and this one is good enough. How can we have given liberty to Africans, to men without any civilization, who had not the slightest idea as to what a colony, or for that matter France was? If the majority of the members of the Convention had understood what they were doing, and known about the colonies, would they have abolished slavery [in 1794]? I very much doubt it."⁵⁰ His prejudices were reinforced by a powerful pro-

⁴⁸ Hazareesingh, 154.

⁴⁹ Hazareesingh, 156.

⁵⁰ Hazareesingh, 302.

slavery lobby of colonial capitalists and merchants who desired the restoration of the former order and the reestablishment of slavery throughout all French colonies.



For these reasons, Napoleon launched an invasion in 1801 to annihilate the dominion of the blacks in Saint-Domingue. He dispatched **General Charles Victoire-Emmanuel Leclerc**, his brother-in-law. Leclerc was a disastrous appointment. He was vain without any outstanding leadership qualities. He had no combat experience outside of Europe, no knowledge of the regional complications of Hispaniola, or any understanding of the cultural complexities in the colony. Like Napoleon, his racial bigotries blinded him to underestimate the blacks as cowards who were afraid of war.

He carried secret orders from Napoleon meticulously detailing how the subjugation was to be achieved. After securing the major coastal cities, any opposing rebels were to be executed within twenty-four hours. Next, Toussaint and the other black generals were to be pacified, then arrested by deception, and immediately shipped to France. Finally, when Leclerc saw fit, he was to reinstate slavery and restore absolute French rule. As bait, Napoleon sent Toussaint's two sons from school in France bearing a congratulatory letter. The large, experienced expeditionary force with over 20,000 troops also included mulatto military leaders Andre Rigaud, Alexander Pétion, and Jean-Pierre Boyer.

Rumors of the impending expedition gave Toussaint advanced time to prepare. He strengthened the forts, imported weapons from the United States, and concealed them throughout the countryside. He devised a scorched earth defensive strategy—burn the cities and lay waste to the habitations, fall back into the mountains to carry out a guerilla war, and wait for climate and yellow fever to cripple the French.

When Toussaint first laid eyes on the immense armada arrayed against him, he said, “We are lost, all France has come to Saint-Dominique.”⁵¹

⁵¹ Heidl, Heidl, and Heidl, 97.



Burning of Cap-Français

Onshore in Cap-Français, Toussaint assigned Henri Christophe to receive Leclerc's emissary. The envoy was offended to be received by someone of a lesser rank than Toussaint. Leclerc wrongly assumed that a black, former slave would simply be persuaded to relinquish the city with the promise of some perfunctory honors before Toussaint arrived. Christophe was insulted by the insinuation that he would betray his commander. Leclerc's letter warned that 15,000 soldiers would disembark at dawn if Christophe did not capitulate. But he was prepared to carry out Toussaint's orders and torch elegant Cap-Français and retreat to the interior mountains. Christophe rebuffed Leclerc's threat by retorting, "The very ground underfoot will be on fire before your squadron drops anchor."⁵² True to his word, Christophe set fire to his own mansion first and ignited the city as the French soldiers stormed ashore. The New Paris of the New World that was reconstructed after the destruction in 1795 went up in a sea of flames.

⁵² Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 98.



Leclerc's troops disembark in Cap-Français

Toussaint's forces put up fierce resistance, and the French suffered greatly. Leclerc lost over 4,000 men in the first month through death, injury, and disease. Seriously weakened, in February of 1802, a demoralized Leclerc requested urgent reinforcements of 12,000 in order to save the colony and pleaded for Napoleon to recall him to France.

The conflict's decisive battle occurred from March 4-24, 1802, at the **Battle of La Crete-a-Pierrot**, in the Upper Artibonite Valley. General Dessalines concentrated his forces in a fort built by the British, while Toussaint and Christophe harassed Leclerc in the rear. At one point, Dessalines spread a trail of gunpowder up to the first gate and seizing a torch threatened his troops, "I will blow up the fort if you do not defend it!"⁵³

A French division bravely assaulted through a murderous fire of grapeshot and musketry that slaughtered 400 attackers along with two generals. Forced to retreat, the French resumed their frontal attacks a week later with repeated day and night

⁵³ "Jean-Jacques Dessalines," The Louverture Project, https://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Jean-Jacques_Dessalines, 1 March 2012.

assaults but were repulsed each time, losing two more generals. “As the night fell and the French again pulled back, mongrel dogs ranged the field, tearing the flesh of over 700 dead and wounded Frenchmen.”⁵⁴

Eventually, more than 12,000 French troops surrounded the fort, and their bombardment took its toll on the defenders as casualties amounted to over 400 as their ammunition and supplies ran low. On a daring nighttime move, 600 able-bodied Haitian troops slipped through the French lines, leaving only their dead and wounded behind. Ultimately, the French took the fort, but they lost twice as many men. They were shocked by the blacks’ battle skills. La Crete-a-Pierrot marked the end of organized resistance.



La Crete-a-Pierrot

Toussaint recognized that his forces did not have sufficient resources to ultimately prevail. Several of his generals, notably Dessalines and Christophe, conceded their untenable position, convened secret rendezvouses with the French, and agreed to transfer their allegiance. Acknowledging his vulnerable situation, Toussaint negotiated surrender terms to Leclerc on May 5, 1803. The French assured him that he could quietly retire to civilian life at his plantation in Ennery.

⁵⁴ Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 101.

Later, Leclerc wrote to the colonial minister in Paris, “Toussaint must not be free and should be imprisoned in the interior of the Republic. May he never see Saint-Domingue again. You cannot hold Toussaint far enough from the ocean or put him in a prison that is too strong.”⁵⁵

One month later, on June 7, 1802, Toussaint was summoned by General Brunet to a conference. A trap was set. Upon his arrival, Toussaint was arrested, driven through the night to the coastal city of Gonaïves, and placed on a waiting ship. His wife and sons were also seized. Upon boarding the ship, Toussaint told the captain: *“In overthrowing me, you have cut down in Saint-Domingue only the trunk of the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots, for they are numerous.”*⁵⁶



⁵⁵ Farmer, Paul, “Who Removed Aristide?”, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n08/paul-farmer/who-removed-aristide>, (2009).

⁵⁶ “Toussaint Louverture,” *The Louverture Project*, 13 January 2010, https://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Toussaint_Louverture

Once across the Atlantic, he was transported to a damp, frigid dungeon in Fort-de-Joux in the French Alps. Unsuccessfully, the authorities attempted everything in their power to break him physically and psychologically. He never saw or heard from his family again. On April 7, 1803, a guard discovered his lifeless body hovered over the ashes of his cold fireplace. He was unaware that the army he formerly commanded would one day vanquish Napoleon's army and win Haiti's coveted independence.



Death certificate of Toussaint Louverture

Toussaint's legacy lived on. In 1863, John Rely Beard released his American edition of *Toussaint L'Ouverture: A Biography and Autobiography*, which had been released previously in England, in the "hope of affording some aid to the sacred cause of freedom, especially as involved in the extinction of slavery."⁵⁷

British poet William Wordsworth was deeply influenced by Toussaint during his early years. His 1802 sonnet while Toussaint lay freezing in a dungeon, "To Toussaint L'Ouverture," illustrated how the Haitian leader's legacy and imprisonment were followed around the world.

To Toussaint L'Ouverture

William Wordsworth (1770–1850)

Toussaint, the most unhappy man of men!
Whether the whistling Rustic tend his plough
Within thy hearing, or thy head be now
Pillowed in some deep dungeon's earless den;—

⁵⁷ J. R. Beard, *Toussaint L'Ouverture: A Biography and Autobiography*. iii.

O miserable Chieftain! where and when
Wilt thou find patience? Yet die not; do thou
Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow:
Though fallen thyself, never to rise again,
Live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
There's not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and man's unconquerable mind.



Toussaint Louverture's cell in Fort de Joux⁵⁸

⁵⁸ See APPENDIX C: Letter by the French Minister of the Marine to the Fort De Joux Commandant (1802) and APPENDIX D: Toussaint L'Ouverture's Letter to Napoleon Bonaparte from Fort De Joux (1802).

Chapter 5

INDEPENDENCE

1803

Damn sugar! Damn coffee! Damn colonies! –Napoleon Bonaparte

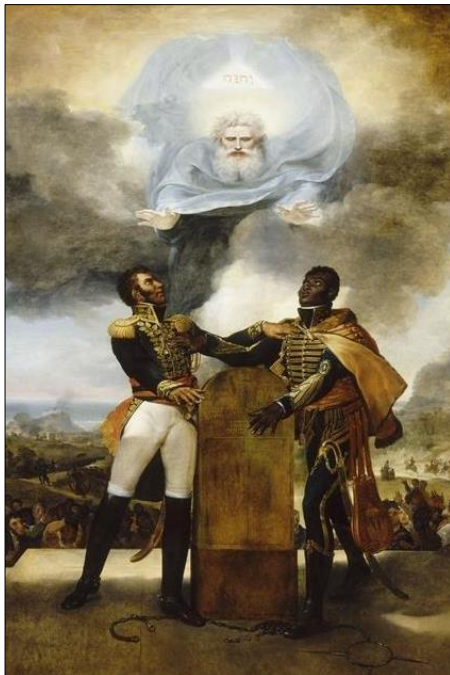




Napoleon Bonaparte's egotism produced unintended consequences that he would ultimately regret. The betrayal, arrest, and deportation of Toussaint Louverture, and his mandate to restore slavery throughout the colonies reignited a firestorm that destabilized the allegiance of leaders such as Dessalines, Christophe, and Pétion. Realizing that if Toussaint could be abducted and extradited, everyone was vulnerable. Ultimately, the French had to be defeated and expelled.

Uniting as never before, the noirs and mulattoes set aside their racial and social agendas for self-preservation. In March of 1802, all the rebel commanders gathered at a coastal plantation north of Port-au-Prince to approve a formal act of unification that became known as the Congress of Arcahaie. Mulatto General **Alexander Pétion** and noir General **Jean-Jacques Dessalines** agreed to combine their forces and form a single revolutionary army against the French. Dessalines was selected as the new supreme commander-in-chief.

Toussaint's battle standard was the French tricolor—blue, white, and red. Tradition says that in dramatic fashion, Dessalines ripped the band of white from the tricolor, ground it under his boot, and declared to the cheering crowd that he would drive the whites from the land. His goddaughter, Catherine Flon, stitched the blue and red together as a symbol of their union, the blue representing the noirs and the red for the mulattos.^{59 60}



⁵⁹ The 1822 paintings by the Guadeloupean painter Guillaume Guillon Lethière depicting the union of Alexandre Pétion and Jean-Jacques Dessalines and the stitching of the new flag by Catherine Flon.

⁶⁰ See APPENDIX E: The History of Haiti's Flags.

The resumption of conflict cost the French heavily. As with the British, yellow fever ravaged the French legions in horrific numbers and scenes—up to eighty percent perished, along with sixty-five percent of Leclerc’s general staff. In one year alone, 50,000 men perished at a rate of 30 to 50 a day at a cost of several million dollars to the national treasury.

Leclerc initiated a war of extermination—drowning and slaughtering whole families to suppress the rebellion—but the resistance intensified. In his last letter to Napoleon, Leclerc wrote,

‘Here is my opinion. You will have to exterminate all the blacks in the mountains, women as well as men, except children under twelve. Wipeout half the population in the lowlands, and do not leave in the colony a single black who has worn an epaulet . . . Send 12,000 replacements immediately, and 10 million francs in cash, or Saint-Domingue is lost forever.’⁶¹

On November 2, 1802, General Leclerc succumbed to yellow fever. His replacement was **General Rochambeau**,⁶² who Toussaint labeled as the ‘destroyer of blacks and men of color,’⁶³ exceeded his predecessor’s brutality. Under his command, gruesome mass executions escalated, killing thousands of men, women, and children by hanging, beheading, drowning, and burning. To compensate for his casualties and lack of reinforcements, Rochambeau purchased 1,500 man-hunting dogs from Cuba to track down combatants. His orders forbade feeding the dogs so they would more aggressively pursue and eat the blacks. The savage, bloodthirsty dogs proved to be unpredictable as they even devoured a French drummer boy in their first battle.



The atrocities of Rochambeau, the noirs’ fear of re-enslavement, the despair of the homes de couleur again stripped of their rights—all these accomplished what no ruler or regime in Haiti ever again achieved. For the first and last time in the

⁶¹ Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 107.

⁶² General Donatien-Marie-Joseph Rochambeau is not to be confused with General Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur Rochambeau, his father, who aided General Washington in the American Revolution.

⁶³ Hazareesingh, 312.

history of the country, Haitians of all colors spontaneously united in a single cause.⁶⁴

Each side was under the leadership of a capable and ruthless leader. Each side traded atrocity with atrocity, the particular description of which are sickening and defy credulity of even those used to human inhumanity to humans. Torture, rape, brutal murders, mass murders of non-combatants, mutilation, forcing families to watch the torture, rape and death of loved ones and on and on. The last year of the Haitian Revolution was as savage as any



conflict one can read of in human history. Thomas Ott says this had become a war of racial extermination on both sides.⁶⁵

Events beyond the shores of Saint-Domingue doomed the campaign to failure. On May 18, 1803, Great Britain declared war against France, and Napoleon once again concentrated his energies on the struggle in Europe. Rochambeau's army would not be reinforced or resupplied in sufficient numbers; therefore, they were left alone and outnumbered to fend for themselves. A British Naval Squadron blockaded the island cutting off all possibility of relief.

In the same year, Napoleon abandoned his ambitions of a Western Hemisphere empire when he sold Louisiana to the United States.

In November of 1803, the **Battle of Vertières**, the final battle of a long and brutal revolution commenced in Cap-Français. Troops led by rebel General Capois-la-Mort mounted fearless frontal attacks on the city's forts. His bravery was formally saluted by Rochambeau during a cease-fire amid the battle. In a final desperate act reminiscent of the French Grenadiers of Napoleon's European campaigns, Rochambeau launched a counterattack that was repulsed in hand-to-hand combat.

⁶⁴ Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 109.

⁶⁵ Corbett, 24.



Battle of Vertières

Napoleon's forces were defeated; Saint-Dominique was lost. Dessalines' terms of surrender gave Rochambeau and his army ten days to depart and a promise of safe conduct to the wounded until they were able to return to France. Rochambeau chose to surrender to British authorities rather than face the retribution of the liberated. He fled to Jamaica. Eight hundred of the remaining French sick and wounded were loaded onto barges, taken out to sea, and drowned, on orders from Dessalines.

When Napoleon learned of the defeat of Saint-Domingue at the cost of over 50,000 soldiers and sailors, he burst out, "Damn sugar! Damn coffee! Damn colonies!" Later reflecting while in exile on St. Helena, he said, "I must reproach myself for the attempt on Saint-Domingue during the Consulship. It was a grave mistake. I should have been satisfied to govern by means of Toussaint L'Ouverture."⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 111.

After twelve years of upheaval, France was finally expelled from Hispaniola, and Haitian independence was proclaimed, standing as only the second republic in the Americas and the first black and former slave nation in the world. On January 1, 1804, Dessalines formally declared the nation independent and named it Haiti after its indigenous Arawak name.

But the country was in utter ruins. “Of the 30,000 whites in the colony in 1789, only 10,000 remained. The rest had been killed or had emigrated. Of the 40,000 free Mulattoes and free blacks there were still about 30,000, while of the 500,000 Negro slaves perhaps one-third had perished. Plantations and cultivation had been destroyed far and wide.”⁶⁷ “In 1789, the population of the colony, not counting whites, numbered at least 700,000. The first census of free Haiti in 1824 numbered 351,819 persons. It thus appears (no historian can ever know with certainty) that the revolution in Saint-Domingue devoured at least 50 percent of its children.”⁶⁸



Battle of Vertières monument, Cap-Haitien

⁶⁷ James, 241-242.

⁶⁸ Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 114.

Chapter 6

REVERBERATIONS

Forcing people to do what they do not want to do is like trying to fill the ocean with rocks. – Haitian proverb



Monument of Toussaint Louverture on the Champ de Mars, Port-au-Prince



The legacy of the Haitian Revolution lives deeply in the hearts of the Haitian people. It is their source of pride that stands as an enduring testament to their struggle and triumph over oppression and racism. Wherever one travels throughout the country, tributes stand as a constant reminder of this once glorious moment.

Beyond its shores, Haiti's liberation has resounded throughout the world as an abiding phenomenon of defining importance for many people concerned with class struggles, colonialism, black history, and Latin American emancipation. It inspired the imaginations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century revolutionaries across the Americas. In 1815, Simon Bolivar came to Haiti after his first failed rebellion. He subsequently made the abolition of slavery part of his mission for independence. Cuba, which had triple the number of slaves as Saint-Domingue, often invoked Toussaint's example during their War of Independence (1868-1878).

"Fidel Castro reflected in 1954 from his prison cell that the historical episode which was driving him to 'revolutionize Cuba from top to bottom' was 'the insurrection of black slaves in Haiti,' adding: 'at a time when Napoleon was imitating Cesar, and France resembled Rome, the soul of Spartacus was reborn in Toussaint Louverture.'"⁶⁹

In the United States, as scores of refugees fled Saint-Domingue, African Americans followed the events with intense interest. Many sailors who worked on ships were African Americans, and they brought back tales from their Caribbean voyages that gave an uplifting vision to their plight. These stories inspired the slave conspiracies of Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. "Just before the outbreak of the Civil War, a chaplain in South Carolina noted that in the American South, where there were four million slaves by 1860, 'the name of Toussaint Louverture has been passed from mouth to mouth until it has become a secret household word' which symbolized 'the universal love of liberty.'"⁷⁰

Frederick Douglas championed Haiti in his speeches and writings. He served as the American Consul-General under the administration of President Benjamin Harrison and Haiti's commissioner to the World's Fair in 1893. The revolution aroused the thoughts of black activists W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James.

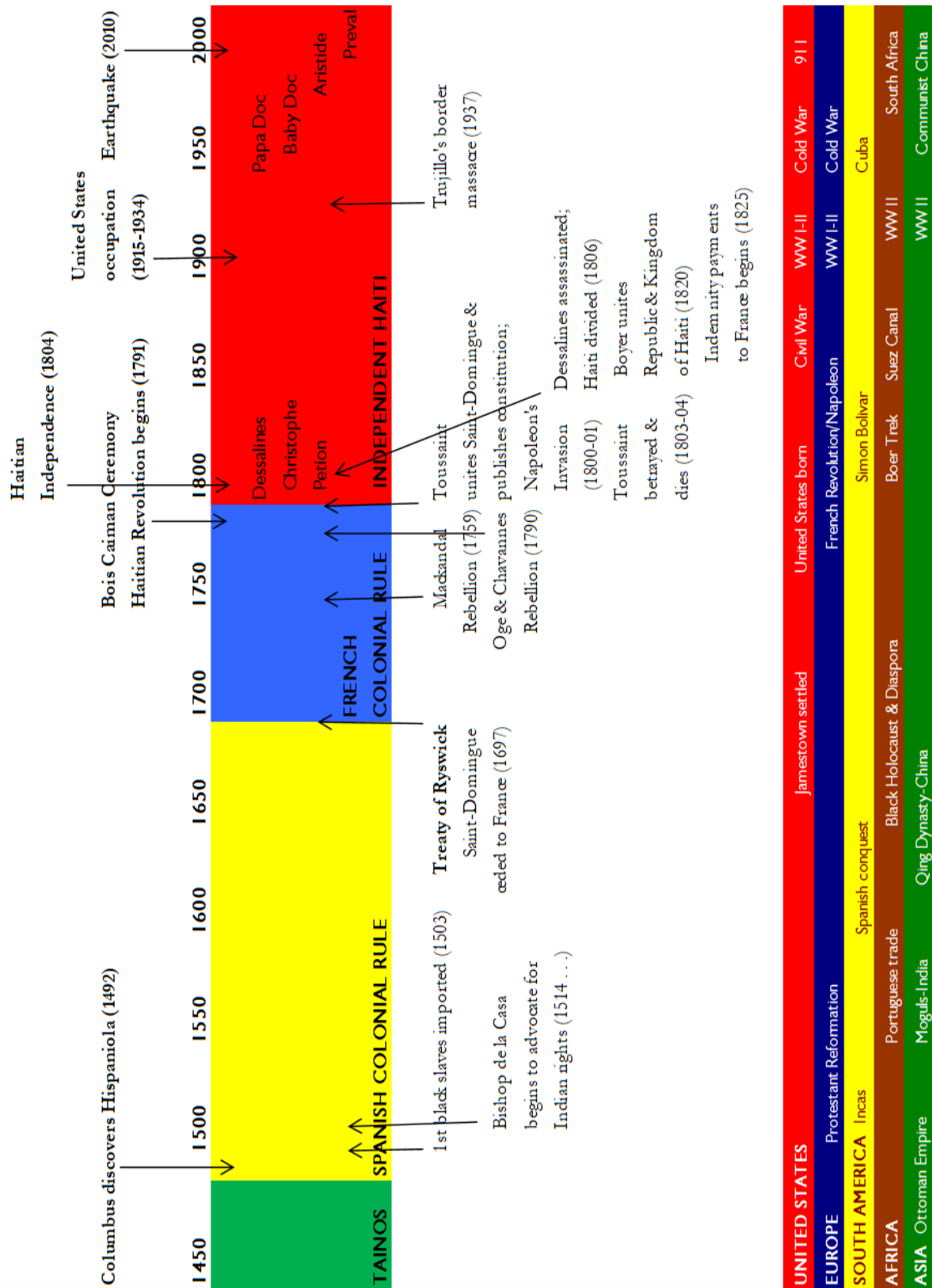
Across the Atlantic, Irish republicans compared their own oppression by the British to the slaves of Saint-Domingue. Irish republican leader James Napper Tandy expressed his solidarity with Toussaint, noting that 'we are all of the same family, black and white, the work of the same creator.'⁷¹

⁶⁹ Hazareesingh, 327.

⁷⁰ Hazareesingh, 341.

⁷¹ Hazareesingh, 330.

APPENDIX A: A HISTORY OF HAITI TIMELINE (1492 – 2010)



APPENDIX B: TALE OF TWO REVOLUTIONS (1789 – 1804)

FRENCH REVOLUTION		HAITIAN REVOLUTION	
1789	Estates General National Assembly; Tennis Court Oath Fall of Bastille: French Revolution begins Abolition of feudal rights Declaration of the Rights of Man Women's March on Versailles - Louis XVI taken to Paris	1789	Saint-Domingue at height of prosperity Colonial Assemblies formed Free-people-of-color petition National Assembly Colonial Assembly blocks Natial Assembly reforms
1790	Nobility abolished Civil Constitution	1790	People-of-color seek rights before National Assembly Colonial Assembly declares Saint-Domingue atonomous Ogé and Chavennes (people-of-color) lead revolt
1791	Political rights granted to free people-of-color and blacks Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette captured at Varennes National Assembly revokes rights to people-of-color New Constitution Commissioners dispatched to restore order	1791	Vincent Ogé executed in Cap-Haitien White supremists dominate Saint-Domingue Assembly Bois Caïman Ceremony Haitian Revolution launched in the North Whites reject rights of people-of-color and attack Port-au-Prince burned
1792	France at war with Austria & Prussia Guillotine adopted as official means of execution Paris riots; Tuileries Palace stormed; Louis XVI arrested French Republic proclaimed	1792	Compromise efforts fail Toussaint commands his own military force Rights granted to free-people-of-color and blacks Commissioners arrive with 6,000 troops Commissioners support people-of-color against whites
1793	Louis XVI executed Britain, Spain, Netherlands declares war against France Committee of Public Safety - Reign of Terror New Constitution Marie Antoinette executed	1793	Toussaint begins fighting for Spain Formal Spanish alliance with Jean-François and Biassou Toussaint becomes a Spanish general Governor-General flees with 10,00 white refugees Sonthonax abolishes slavery British troops invade and reinstate slavery Commissioners and free-people-of-color alliance Toussaint and Spain control northern Saint-Domingue
1794	Commission abolishes in all French colonies French victory over Austrians Robespierre executed Sonthonax recalled to France to face trial for treason	1794	Toussaint changes allegiance to France Britain proclaims sovereignty over Saint-Domingue British capture Port-au-Prince Toussaint fights against Jean-François and Biassou Laveaux named Governor-General of Saint-Domingue
1795	Vendémiaire uprising; Napoleon's "grape shot" National Convention dissolved Executive Directory established	1795	Toussaint and Rigaud attack British Toussaint takes Mirebelais after five months of fighting Treaty of Basle- Spain cedes island to France
1796	Napoleonic Wars begin Treaty allies France and Spain against Britain	1796	Laveaux seized and imprisoned by people-of-color Toussaint rescues Laveaux Laveaux appoints Toussaint Lieutenant Governor Sonthonax and commissioners return Toussaint's sons sent to France for education Laveaux leaves Saint-Domingue for French Directory
1797	Counter revolutionary royalists win majority in legislature Speech denounces the black revolution Royalists defeated in coup d'etat French defeat Austrians in northern Italy	1797	Sonthonax appoints Toussaint Commander-in-Chief Toussaint forces Sonthonax to leave Saint-Domingue Toussaint publishes his "Refutation"

French legislature incorporates Saint-Domingue Napoleon's war commences in Egypt	1798	1798	French agent Hedouville arrives, provokes discontentment Toussaint negotiates British withdrawal Hedouville flees after Toussaint orchestrates insurrection
Napoleon overthrows French Directory Napoleon removes colonies right to representation Napoleon declares himself Consul for Life	1799	1799	War of Knives against Toussaint by Rigaud John Adams signs proclamation allowing U.S. trade Treaty between Toussaint and Maitland (British)
Napoleon obtains Louisiana from Spain Napoleon fights Austrians in Italy Spain cedes Louisiana Territory to France	1800	1800	French delegation of consuls arrive Toussaint defeats Rigaud with U.S. and British aid Toussaint establishes plantationlabor decree Toussaint controls all Saint-Domingue
England's war with France ends Napoleon sends 20,000 troops to Saint-Domingue	1801	1801	Toussaint captures Santo Domingo and abolishes slavery Toussaint publishes his Constitution
Napoleon restores slavery in the colonies Black and people-of-color banned from entry into France	1802	1802	Leclerc's invasion armada arrives Toussaint burns Cape Français Battle of Crête-à-Pierrot Dessalines & Christophe defect to Leclerc Toussaint agrees to a ceasefire and retires Toussaint deceived and deported Toussaint imprisoned in Fort de Joux; dictates Memoir Dessalines and Pétion unite against France Leclerc dies of yellow fever; succeeded by Rochambeau
British War with France resumes Louisiana Purchase gives territory to U.S.	1803	1803	Gen. Rochambeau initiates massacres Toussaint dies at Fort de Joux Congress of Arcahaie- Haitian flag Battle of Vertières- French defeated Proclamation of Independence signed Last French troops leave Saint-Domingue
Third Coalition War	1804	1804	Republic of Hayti

APPENDIX C:
LETTER BY THE FRENCH MINISTER OF THE MARINE TO
THE FORT DE JOUX COMMANDANT (1802)

Toussaint Louverture arrived at the French prison Fort de Joux in August of 1802. French Minister of Marine, Admiral Denis Decrès, delivered Napoléon Bonaparte's orders to ensure that Toussaint's conditions of imprisonment would be as difficult as possible by giving the following instructions to the Prison Commandant Amyot.

Minister of the Marine to the Commandant at Fort de Joux

5 Brumaire, Year X (October 27, 1802)

I received your letter of 26 Vendémiaire relative to the prisoner of state Toussaint Louverture. The First Consul charged me to make known to you that you will respond with your head for his person. Toussaint Louverture has no right to any consideration other than that demanded by humanity. Hypocrisy is a vice as familiar to him as honor and loyalty are to you, Citizen Commandant. His conduct since his detention is such as to have fixed your opinions on what one should expect of him. You have seen yourself that he sought to fool you, and you were in fact fooled by the admission to his presence of one of his satellites disguised as a doctor.

You should not restrict yourself to what you've done in order to assure yourself that he has neither money nor jewels. You must search everywhere to assure yourself and examine to make sure that he hasn't hidden or buried any in his prison. Take his watch from him. If this is agreeable to him, this need can be met by establishing in his room one of those cheap clocks that are good enough to show the passing of time. If he is sick, the health officer best known by you must alone care for him and see him, but only when it's necessary and in your presence, and with the greatest precautions so that these visits don't in any way go beyond the sphere of what is most indispensable.

The only way Toussaint would have to see his lot improved would be for him to set aside his dissimulation. His personal interests, the religious sentiments with which he should have been penetrated for the expiation of the evil he has done, imposed on him the obligation of truthfulness. But he is far from fulfilling it, and by his continual dissimulation he approaches those who approach him with interest in his lot. You can tell him he can be tranquil concerning the lot of his family; its existence is committed to my care and they want for nothing.

I presume that you have put away from him everything that could bear any relation to a uniform. Toussaint is his name; it's the only denomination that should be given him. A warm garment, gray or brown, large and comfortable, and a round hat should be his apparel. When he brags of having been a general he does nothing but recall his crimes, his hideous conduct, and his tyranny over Europeans. He merits then, nothing but the most profound contempt for his ridiculous pride.

I salute you.

Toussaint died at Fort de Joux on April 7, 1803.

Source: "Letter by the French Minister of the Marine to the Fort de Joux Commandant (1802)," *The Louverture Project*,
[https://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Letter_by_the_French_Minister_of_the_Marine_to_the_Fort_de_Joux_Commandant_\(1802\)](https://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Letter_by_the_French_Minister_of_the_Marine_to_the_Fort_de_Joux_Commandant_(1802)), 11 September 2006.

APPENDIX D:
TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE'S LETTER TO NAPOLEON
BONAPARTE FROM FORT DE JOUX (1802)

Toussaint Louverture wrote the following letter from captivity in the dungeon at Fort de Joux to Napoléon Bonaparte.

In the dungeon of Fort Joux, this 30 Fructidor, an XI. (17th September, 1802)

General, and First Consul,

The respect and the submission which I could wish forever graven on my heart [here words are wanting as if obliterated by tears (Beard)]. If I have sinned in doing my duty, it is contrary to my intentions; if I was wrong in forming the constitution, it was through my great desire to do good; it was through having employed too much zeal, too much self-love, thinking I was pleasing the Government under which I was; if the formalities which I ought to have observed were neglected, it was through inattention. I have had the misfortune to incur your wrath, but as to fidelity and probity, I am strong in my conscience, and I dare affirm, that among all the servants of the state no one is more honest than myself. I was one of your soldiers, and the first servant of the Republic in St. Domingo; but now I am wretched, ruined, dishonored, a victim of my own services; let your sensibility be moved at my position. You are too great in feeling and too just not to pronounce a judgment as to my destiny. I charge General Cafarelli, your aide-de-camp, to put my report into your hands. I beg you to take it into your best consideration. His honor, his frankness have forced me to open my heart to him.

Salutation and respect,
Toussaint L'Ouverture

Source: "Toussaint letter to Napoléon from Fort de Joux (1802)," *The Louverture Project*, [https://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Toussaint_letter_to_Napol%C3%A9on_from_Fort_de_Joux_\(1802\)](https://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Toussaint_letter_to_Napol%C3%A9on_from_Fort_de_Joux_(1802)), 17 September 2007.

APPENDIX E: THE HISTORY OF HAITI'S FLAG



On May 18, 1802, the leading generals of the revolution gathered for a formal act of unification and collaboration at the Congress of Arcahaie. As Dessalines stood to address his commanders, the table was draped in the French Tricolor. Seizing the flag, he tore out the white and ground it underfoot. His wife's goddaughter stitched it together and Haiti had her first flag. The motto "*Liberté ou la mort*" (*Liberty or Death*) was inscribed in white, harkening back to the Bois Caïman Ceremony that had originally launched the revolution in 1791.

After Haiti's independence, Dessalines substituted black for the blue, designating the new nation's two races *noir* and *mulatto*. Eliminating the white was more than symbolic for him; he embarked on a path of racial extermination after independence was gained, wanting nothing to do with *blancs*. The fifth stanza of Haiti's national anthem, "La Dessalinienne," reads,

For the Flag, for the Nation,
It is good to die, it is good to die,
Our past shouts:
Thou shall have harden your soul.
It is good to die, it is good to die,
For the Flag, for the Nation,

It is good to die, die, die,
For the Flag, for the Nation.



Dessalines' flag



Coat of Arms

President Petion restored the blue and red but rearranged the strips horizontally. He also emblazoned the flag with Haiti's national coat of arms—a palm tree with the Phrygian cap, a symbol of freedom, and two cannons. The motto at the bottom reads, "*L'UNION FAIT LA FORCE*" (*In Unity There Is Strength* or *Union Makes Strength*).



King Henri's flag



Faustin's flag

Henri Christophe rebelled from the Republic of Haiti and Petion, establishing the Kingdom of Haiti in the northern regions. His red and black banner had in the center, a shield with a phoenix under five five-pointed stars, all in gold on a blue background, a shield and a crown, with the Latin inscription "*ex cinerebus nascitur.*" In 1849, Faustin Soulouque proclaimed himself emperor under the title of Faustin I. The blue-red flag was established in the 1849 constitution, but the shield was modified. Faustin's Empire ended in 1859 and the previous coat of arms was restored.



Republic of Spanish Haiti



Francois Duvalier's flag

President Boyer annexed the Spanish part of the island, Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic), in February 1822, after it had proclaimed its independence from Spain. It was renamed *Republica del Haiti espanol* (Republic of Spanish Haiti).

In 1964, Francois Duvalier established himself as President for Life with a new constitution. The flag was reverted to the black and red with the omission of the Cap of Liberty. The black was placed beside the staff because “black is the color of true Haiti.” Duvalier stated, “The Haitian flag and I are one and indivisible.” When Duvalier’s heir, his son Jean-Claude, was deposed in a coup d’état in February 7, 1986, long-hidden blue and red flags emerged to be carried by marchers in the streets. The current flag of Haiti was formally adopted on February 25, 1987.

The flag, long a symbol of Haitian pride, is celebrated annually on May 18 as Haitian Flag Day. Events take place not just in Haiti, but by the international Haitian diaspora. People come together and enjoy the day food singing, and dancing.

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AUTHOR

“The life I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place my touch will be felt.”

-Frederick Buechner

Michael VanHook is the founder and Executive Director International Strategic Alliances (ISA), a mission outreach to Haiti, and the MSV Educational Network, an English language and cultural institute in Brazil. ISA exists to make a significant and enduring difference in the lives of the Haitian people by helping them to rise above their present circumstances, reach the highest potential of their intended design, and become catalysts for change in their spheres of influence. ISA accomplishes this by strategically and collaboratively aligning themselves with leaders and groups to mutually design and implement sustainable humanitarian, educational, and leadership initiatives.

Michael has worn many hats throughout his life—educator, businessman, pastor, and advocate. His personal journey has been a passionate pursuit to discover how his life, transformed by God’s grace, can make a difference in the lives of others. Any success that he has achieved, he attributes to the faithful support of family and friends. Michael holds degrees from Northern Kentucky University, Asbury Seminary, and Morehead State University.

His improbable journey with Hispaniola has transformed his life as much as theirs—“I can’t explain why or how, but their love has profoundly changed me.” The spark was lit when he made a trip to Haiti as an 18-year-old high school senior. His deep, abiding love for the Haitian people motivated him to found the International Strategic Alliances as a response to their stated dreams and needs. He considers the greatest compliment that he has ever received, was when a Haitian man told him, “I consider you a Haitian because you treat us as equals.”

Michael and his wife Luciana live in the Greater Cincinnati area. He has three adult daughters and two granddaughters.

