

Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution

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Haiti has just celebrated the 200th anniversary of the revolution that brought about its existence as a formally independent state. Anyone who wishes to study this revolution can still do no better than to turn to a classic of Marxism, Trotskyism and Black Liberation: ***The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution***

In 1938, the Trinidad-born CLR James first published this remarkable work, openly intending his book to "stimulate the coming emancipation of Africa". And indeed it did. As an account of a vast popular revolutionary war, it is a revolutionary book.

James says of its subject: "The revolt (1791-1803) is the only successful slave revolt in history, and the odds which it had to overcome is evidence of the magnitude of the interests that were involved. The transformation of slaves trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organise themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement."

Haiti is a huge island rich in natural resources. The Spanish, later joined by the French, turned it into a plantation colony where coffee and sugar plantations and mines were worked by huge numbers of Black slaves, seized from west Africa and carried off to the Caribbean with indescribable violence and suffering. By 1789, there were half a million in St Domingue, the French western half of the island. The export trade from this colony made up two-thirds of France's entire gross national product.

The slave colony was kept under the heel of France and the local elite of white planters by a regime of terror and sadism. Individual slaves passively or actively resisting their super-exploitation were faced with horrific punishments. Groups of slaves revolted, fleeing into the mountains, but the system remained intact.

In 1789, however, news came from France of revolution, the storming of the Bastille. Spread through newspapers and pamphlets, the ideals of this revolution - human rights, citizenship, liberation - reached the huge colony where so many were enslaved, oppressed and exploited.

The ordinary "field slave" could not read these, but a small number of freed former "house slaves" had been educated by their masters. One such was Toussaint L'Ouverture (1743-1803). Freed when about 30, he had learned various "European skills" including medical and military ones. Toussaint adopted the name L'Ouverture after the "opening" of the struggle for liberty.

Meanwhile in France, the National Assembly granted limited voting rights to free "coloureds" in May 1791, at the urging of the abolitionist organisation, Les Amis des Noirs (Friends of the Blacks). This was too much for the white planters. Beginning on 22 August 1791, slaves rose in arms, massacring plantation owners.

Toussaint L'Ouverture joined the rebels as a medical officer. His remarkable organisational and military

capacities soon became apparent. He became aide-de-camp to the foremost black general, Jean-Francois Biassou, and then a general of his own troops.

In September 1792, a fleet arrived from France with the order to enforce the decisions of the assembly but also to restore order and the exploitation of the slaves. Turning to the rebellious slaves for mass support against the counterrevolutionary planters and the circling wolves of the British and Spanish forces, the revolutionary commission leader Leger Sonthonax offered freedom to all black slaves joining the cause of the French Republic.

On 29 August 1793, slavery on Saint-Domingue was abolished. On 3 February 1794, the Jacobin-dominated National Assembly declared slavery itself abolished. Toussaint found his first genuine allies in the Paris sans culottes. He was never really to waver in his loyalty to the French revolution, with tragic consequence when the revolution in France experienced a series of conservative coups and counter-revolutions.

In 1793, the British and Spanish entered the fray. Toussaint L'Ouverture now really came to the fore as a general, defeating first the Spanish (1794), and then the British (1795). Britain lost 80,000 soldiers to disease and the rebels, a small remnant holding on until 1798. By 1799 Toussaint controlled much of the island

But in France, the radical Jacobins had been driven from power. The conservative Thermidor regime, then the semi-dictatorships of the Directory and the Consulate began to roll back the political gains of the revolution, including the abolition of slavery. The French bourgeoisie demanded their human property back, and above all their fabulously wealthy Caribbean colony.

After provoking the middle-class "mulattos" (people of mixed black and white ancestry) into waging a bloody civil war in St Domingue, the First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte launched a direct reconquest, sending 60,000 soldiers to restore slavery. Toussaint, after his heroic leadership of the liberation struggle, stumbled at this critical stage.

He fatally hesitated over a final confrontation with a France that he still identified with revolution. Enforcing labour discipline on the former slaves to revive the economy and refusing to fully expropriate the plantation owners, he provoked a black labourers' revolt which he ruthlessly suppressed. He rapidly lost the confidence of much of his army.

Toussaint's misplaced trust in France led to his own downfall. In 1802, entrusting himself to the French commander Leclerc, he was seized and transported to France, to die in a cold dank prison high in the Jura mountains.

Before boarding the ship to France Toussaint declared "in overthrowing me, you have cut down in San Domingo the tree of Liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are numerous and deep."

CLR James's Black Jacobins sees Toussaint as a heroic and ultimately a tragic figure. He credits him with uniting the revolutionary forces, as well as winning many of the most important battles. When he was captured, his most powerful generals, Moise and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, completed the revolution, defeating the French troops sent by Napoleon. In November 1803, Haiti was declared an independent republic, the world's oldest black republic and the second-oldest republic in the Western Hemisphere, after the United States.

