

Haitian Revolution: Civilization and Modernity in the Caribbean

Michael Hamilton III

Senior, Education and History

The Haitian Revolution was unparalleled throughout the world at the time in its significance. This revolution saw the overthrow of foreign colonizers at the hands of a slavery uprising. In the lead up to the Haitian Revolution, there were deep-rooted issues of skin color, class, and gender. Between the enslaved population and white colonizer population there stood a class of people referred to as the Affranchis.¹ This class was made up of people mixed with Black African and white European descent, then called mulattoes. Some of the Affranchis were slave owners and had hopes of being on the same economic level as that of their European counterparts who generally

discriminated against them because of their heritage. The Affranchis' aspirations to better their class played a key role in the nation's long battle for independence.

Slavery has been a part of human society as far back as ancient times. Not only is slavery a tool of degrading and controlling people, but it is also a means of economics. Having an abundance of labor, at little to no cost, can only help one's business or industry boom. That was the exact thought of the French as they looked to seize control of the nation of Haiti. There had been long standing relations between France and Haiti, then referred to as Saint Domingue. The influence of the French in this region can be traced back as far as 1665, as the area had a plethora of gold to be mined and land for the taking. Along with the incoming French colonizers they also brought with them some 5,000 African slaves.

¹ David Geggus and Norman Fiering, *The World of the Haitian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009)

The Revolution started off with small conflicts in the early 1790s. The building up of social instability and subsequent political unrest were the major factors leading up to the slavery rebellion. In May 1791, the French government granted citizenship to the wealthier Affranchis, however Haiti's European population at the time disregarded the law. Within the following two months, fights erupted between the European and Affranchis population.² Amidst the chaos between both sides, thousands of slaves rose up in rebellion in August 1791. These early conflicts are regarded as the initial spark of the Haitian Revolution. In an effort to calm the tensions between each population, the French assembly granted citizenship to the remaining Affranchis population in 1792.³ The following year, French commissioner Léger-Félicité Sonthonax was sent to Haiti to maintain order in the nation. Offering

freedom to slaves who joined his army, the French government came to an agreement to end slavery in 1794 throughout the nation.

In the wake of the Haitian Revolution, many important figures came to the forefront. A notable figure from the Affranchis class was Pompée Valentin Vastey. Born to a white French father and Black Haitian mother, Vastey was able to become a well-known writer and politician living throughout the entirety of the revolution. He served as secretary to King Henri Christophe and documented a vivid account of life in Haiti at the time of rebellion in his work, "An Essay on the Causes of the Revolution and Civil Wars of Hayti." Recalling the amount of growth the nation went through during the rebellion, Vastey writes, "To form a just idea of our progress in civilization, arts and sciences, we ought never to lose sight of what we were, and what we are now."⁴ This

² Geggus and Fiering, *World of the Haitian Revolution*.

³ Geggus and Fiering, *World of the Haitian Revolution*.

⁴ Pompee-Valentin Vastey, *An Essay on the Causes of the Revolution and Civil Wars of Hayti, Being a Sequel to the Political Remarks Upon Certain French*

chilling quote encapsulates the turn from a slavery ridden state to an independent nation with great advancement and leadership. Vastey was also on the front running of making news of Haiti's independence known and recognized throughout the global community. "After combatting all the objections and even the cavils urged by this writer against the recognition of our independence, I have established in the most incontestable manner, the justice of our rights and the validity of our claims."⁵ His work responded to numerous pieces of French literature downplaying what took place during the Haitian Revolution and ignoring to recognize them as an independent nation.

Through all the trials and tribulations of this great rebellion, a leader arose to help fight the cause. Toussaint Louverture is a name that is synonymous with the Haitian Revolution. He was born in Haiti in 1743 and

was the son of very well-educated enslaved parents. The plantation manager made Louverture him become a livestock handler, and he later became a house servant for the family on the plantation. When the slave revolt began in late 1791, Louverture was very hesitant to join the resistance due to his relationship with his former master.⁶ After a few weeks of contemplation, he decided to go help his former master escape before the rebel slaves burned his plantation down. Soon after, he decided to join the Black resistance movement, but found himself questioning the authority of the leaders driving this rebellion.⁷ Following many arguments with the head members of the revolution, Louverture decided to put together an army of his own and train them with guerilla warfare style tactics in preparation for battle. His uncanny leadership and ability to command saw him

Publications and Journals Concerning Hayti (Western Luminary office, 1823).

⁵ Vastey, *Causes of the Revolution*.

⁶ Jeremy Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

⁷ Popkin, *Concise History*.

gain a good deal of notoriety by 1793, attracting the likes of Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henry Christophe.⁸ Louverture's victories combined with the success of mulatto forces in the south of Haiti put the French near disaster. However, in 1794, Toussaint decided to speak with the French and offer his views on what has become of the colony since the freeing of slaves. This saw acting governor of Haiti, Étienne Laveaux, name Louverture lieutenant governor.

The mission of Louverture altogether was not to gain "independence" from French rule. He was more interested in the thought of free slaves having rights and with the help of former white slave owners to rebuild the nation together as one. Seeing the totality of the slave uprising throughout Haiti struck fear in other European powers with colonies nearby in the Caribbean. The British government grew very worried that this

revolt might inspire one in their nearby colony of Jamaica. In light of the slaves uprising against the French, the British government deployed their troops on Haitian soil to stop the growth of this rebellion. Along with new British troops to worry about, following the emancipation of all slaves throughout French colonies in 1794, Louverture reversed his allegiance with Spain and joined forces with the French.

After switching away from Spain, his mission was to attack the Spanish controlled region of neighboring Santo Domingo, present day Dominican Republic. With his brilliance in military tactics, Toussaint and his troops were able to forcibly capture the area. Not only did he wage in war against the French, but also had to work to get the Spanish and British out of the colony during the revolution as well. The Haitians and British engaged in intense battles with both sides gaining some wins, but by 1796 more

⁸ Popkin, *Concise History*.

than 12,000 British soldiers died on Haitian soil. Not only was war killing off the men, but the overall impact of yellow fever also played a role. In May 1798, Louverture finally came to an agreement with British colonel, Thomas Maitland. Both sides agreed upon the British side withdrawing from Port-au-Prince and eventually the nation of Haiti altogether. The British asked as part of the deal that Louverture and his army not go to Jamaica and support them in an eventual revolution of any kind. Along with the agreement the British had to pay for the cost of five years of damage done while in the nation, a sum estimated around four million pounds.

Making Haiti the first free independent nation in the Caribbean and brought forth a multitude of change for the better. This great rebellion breathed a new sense of modernization to the land of Haiti in various ways, bringing new infrastructure

such as more bridges, roads, and harbors. Along with other changes, there was a mass exodus of white French men leaving the nation altogether. As the end of war and conflict drew near, Louverture became the supreme ruler of the island. He issued his own new constitution in which he reiterated the abolishing of slavery and declared himself Governor-General for life with absolute power.

Many historians are in agreeance that the acts of the Haitian Revolution were very unique and shed a light for the world on a nation struggling for independence. “This was not only the *first* revolution for independence in the Americas south of the Rio Grande, but also the most socially and politically radical revolution in the Americas, North or South.”⁹ This quote from Gruner accurately captures a majority of literature surrounding the total impact of the Haitian

⁹ Eduardo Gruner, *The Haitian Revolution: Capitalism, Slavery, and Counter-Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020)

Revolution. Pointing to many incredible leaders of this rebellion to take it to the next level, such as Toussaint Louverture. Being that this revolution was led mainly by African born slaves in Haiti has it regarded as one of the radical revolutions in history. It is important to remember that this rebellion was not one solely done by Haitian born fighters or strictly slaves of African descent. However, it was a revolution that both nations contributed to end the years of slavery and torment that plagued the island of then Saint Domingue, later Haiti.¹⁰

The literature surrounding the Haitian Revolution is not quite as prominent or available as that of European counterparts. In some predominantly white countries such as the United States and other European powers, Haiti was not formally recognized as an independent nation until years after their initial freedom. Many scholars such as

Carolyn Fick, author of *Haitian Revolution in an Atlantic Context*, believes that more literature surrounding the events of the rebellion need more of a light shed on them. Fick makes it very clear that no matter what lens a person uses when looking back in history that the Haitian Revolution should be spoken about in high regard as it set the standard in the New World as far as slave rebellion.¹¹

Revolutions can intertwine and draw inspiration from one another. Some historians are in disagreement as to where the Haitian Revolution might have gained their inspiration from. However, a good number of historians argue that the Haitian Revolution gained its inspiration from some of the ideologies of the French Revolution. The way in which the French fought the Old Regime and shifted to a more modern and freer republic became the sparkplug for what the

¹⁰ Carolyn Fick, *The Haitian Revolution in an Atlantic Context* (Michigan State University Press, 1994)

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Haitian Revolution set out to achieve. Along with drawing inspiration, the Haitian Revolution also acted as inspiration for many slaves or disenfranchised people throughout the New World such as Jamaica and the United States. Although other slave rebellions did not reach this magnitude of success, they were still inspired to stand up and take arms from seeing the slave rebellion in Haiti.

As far as the magnitude and impact of the Haitian Revolution, it is very clear that most authors are in agreement that this rebellion holds a strong significance in shaping up the New World. The act of enslaved people being able to rise up and gain their independence from their colonizers was hard to fathom at the time these events unfolding. For many centuries, white people viewed Black or mixed-race people as inferior when it came to strategy, politics, and

military. An overwhelming majority of people believed keeping these Black African and Caribbean people enslaved would cause no trouble and they would obey as that is all they are capable of doing. However, this rebellion started to change the narrative and made it clear that Black people are very capable of pursuing freedom while fighting off white European enemies in the meantime.

Scholars hold firm to continuing research on the Haitian Revolution and recognizing how powerful this rebellion was. It is the only revolution in history won by slaves, and it is imperative to understand the singularity and uniqueness this event holds. As Eduardo Gruner writes, “It has been *forgotten* more completely than perhaps any other major event in modernity.”¹² Along with giving the Haitian Revolution its proper recognitions, many scholars point to the fact that the absence of literature and study on this

¹² Eduardo Gruner, *The Haitian Revolution: Capitalism, Slavery, and Counter-Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020)

topic in comparisons to other revolutions of the world is alarming. More and more authors are trying to explore more research methods to put together exactly how important the period of the Haitian Revolution truly is. Luckily, there have been great strides in uncovering some of these artifacts and history pertaining to this rebellion. As of 2008, historians have been able to piece together some work by Toussaint Louverture. The compilation of letters and proclamations from Louverture himself is a very massive unearthing to help tell the story of this great rebellion.

Aside from the growing agreement about the importance of the Haitian Revolution, there is a small population of scholars that argue in some ways this rebellion can be seen as a failure. Eduardo Gruner, author of *The Haitian Revolution: Capitalism, Slavery, and Counter-Modernity*, contests that in many senses the Haitian

Revolution can be seen as a failure. He measures the “success” of a revolution based on not only at its point of triumph, but also what the nation does with the newfound power.¹³ In cases of revolutions throughout the world, describing them as a failure means that the reasons in which these revolutions were fought at first are still with us in some degree to this day.¹⁴ Though it is hard to appease the vast number of people that come with a nation, acquiring freedom from colonizers who enslaved masses of people can be seen as a monumental victory of itself. Apart from this view shared by Gruner, it is very hard to find any arguments that go against each other in any degree, it is well regarded that what took place in Haiti at the time of its revolutions is very important in numerous ways. It gave birth to one of the first free republics in the western hemisphere, it is the only successful slave rebellion in history, and many more unique reasons as to

¹³ Gruner, *Haitian Revolution*.

¹⁴ Gruner, *Haitian Revolution*.

what makes the Haitian Revolution so important on a global scale.

In regard to what is still left to be figured out about the Haitian Revolution, there are still a few questions that come to mind. I believe with more effort and time put into more research about the rebellion, newer information will arise and help put all the pieces together about the overall reach of the Haitian Revolution worldwide. Personally, I would like to know a little more about the time period right thereafter the revolution was one. What did the newfound free men do now? Was there a new wave of job opportunities available to people still on land? I would be very interested to find more literature regarding the time directly at Haiti winning their independence, and the following few years what they did with it. A few scholars have pointed out that a majority of former enslaved men in Haiti made their way throughout the Americas and tried to spread out. Some men even getting involved

with fighting in the American Revolution. It is well documented that during the Siege of Savannah had an influx of Haitian men join their army in the fight against the British. Although this was prior to the Haitian Revolution and done as an act of trade by the French, it still provided an opportunity for Haitian culture to move into North America. Another area of interest about this topic for me would be the economic impact of these events. The Haitian Revolution lasted quite some time, with the majority of the labor force rising up in rebellion, what affect did this have as far as the economy of Haiti? Was there less trade available due to the revolution? There are many questions to consider when trying to understand the totality of the Haitian Revolution, but if more scholars and historians collaborate on more literature about the topic, a lot of these questions can be resolved.

The Haitian Revolution is an unprecedented chain of events that sent

shockwaves throughout the globe. The importance of this revolution can not be stressed enough, and scholars far and wide recognize the matter as such. It being the only successful slave rebellion in history is enough to let it be known its significance. The rebellion also shed light on very influential leaders such as Toussaint Louverture. With their bravery and tactical brilliance, they were able to lead Haiti to the path of independence and ultimately won it in a monumental victory. The current literature surrounding the Haiti Revolution all can agree that this event is very singular and uncanny in its own regard. As more literature comes to the surface about this topic, it is only right for more information and artifacts to be brought to light as well, helping piece together this puzzle of events and uphold their importance rightfully so.

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