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The First Black Republic

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HST 351
For: Dr. Rector**

During the night of August 22, 1791, a revolt was brewing. That night a tropical storm was raging with lightning, gusts of wind, and heavy showers pouring down around the leaders of the revolt. This was the final meeting before the revolt began. In Haiti, Voodoo was widespread among the slaves brought over from Africa. This night, like others, Voodoo prayers and chants were taking place before the start of the revolt. It is said that even the blood of a recently killed pig was drunk during these ceremonies. The leader of the revolt cried out:

The God who created the sun which gives us light, who refuses 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.¹

This was the beginning of the black slave revolt that would forever change Haiti. I believe that the actions of this

¹ C.L.R. James, The Black Jacobins (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 87.

revolt, which would lead to independence, would actually hinder the economic prosperity of Haiti in the long run.

When Christopher Columbus discovered this island on December 6, 1491, he named it "La Espanola," which later became "Hispaniola." The Spanish ended up settling in the eastern two-thirds of the island and eventually the western third was given to France in 1697 as part of the Ryswick Treaty. During this time and up to the revolt, there were an estimated 450,000 slaves, 40,000 whites, and 30,000 freedmen. Most of the freedmen were mulattoes who considered themselves superior to the slaves.²

Once the slaves began their revolt, they employed merciless tactics. They fought under the idea that, "...in the name of God, every slave killed in battle would re-awaken in the homeland of Africa."³ Each group of slaves, armed with machetes, pruning hooks and torches, murdered their masters and set fire to their plantations. There were so many fires that for three weeks, people could barely distinguish between night and day. From their brutal masters, many slaves learned rape, torture, degradation and death. They held nothing back now that they were the ones taking power. Whites were sawn in two,

² Edward, Lee, "Toussaint L'Ouverture," Blacfax 22, no. 6 (1990): 7.

³ Robert Heinl, Nancy Heinl, Written in Blood (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 45.

and women were raped by gangs of slaves. Slave women even stuffed the severed genitals into the mouths of former masters and rapists as they bled to death.⁴ Children were murdered and then their decapitated heads were impaled on pikes. Although very brutal in their revenge, James stresses that these events were nothing to what the slaves had been subjected to:

Yet in all the records of that time there is no single instance of such fiendish tortures as burying white men up to the neck and smearing the holes in their faces to attract insects, or blowing them up with gun powder, or any of the thousand and one bestialities to which they had been subjected. Compared with what their masters had done to them in cold blood, what they did was negligible, and they were spurred on by the ferocity with which the whites in La Cap treated all slave prisoners who fell into their hands.⁵

The slaves destroyed without ceasing. They were seeking freedom for themselves by destroying everything that represented slavery to them. For example, as long as the plantations were around, the slaves felt that their lives would be comprised of nothing but the working and harvesting of them. Since they wanted nothing to do with

⁴ Lester, Langley, The Americas in the Age of Revolution 1750-1850 (London: Yale University Press, 1996) 113.

⁵ James, 89.

their forced labor and suppression, they destroyed them eagerly. Within a month, the slaves had destroyed a thousand plantations, and killed hundreds of people.⁶

One month into the revolt, we see Toussaint coming onto the scene. It is speculated that he was communicating with the leaders and wanted to see how the initial revolt would do. He was forty five years old, which is an advanced age for that time, and known to people as Old Toussaint.⁷ He was a leader by nature and age and was generally uncontested for one of the highest ranks. He had experience in administration, authority, and the economics of running a plantation. He taught himself to read and read the works of Plutarch, Epicetus, Julius Caesar, Saxe, and Raynal.⁸ He had been impressed by these words of Abbe Raynal:

Nations of Europe, your slaves have need neither of your generosity nor your counsel to break their chains. They need but a leader. Where is this man? He will appear. Have no doubt of that; he will raise the standard of liberty; his companions will rally around him. More impetuous than the torrent, they will leave everywhere the effaceable traces of their just resentment.⁹

⁶ Langley, 112.

⁷ James, 90.

⁸ Lee, 7.

⁹ Lee, 7.

Toussaint thought that he could be this man. Toussaint ended up becoming a leader of one of the slave factions about a month after the initial revolt began.

Over the next ten years, there would be battles between Spain, France, Britain, and the blacks, on this island. By 1800, Toussaint was the main leader in Haiti, and declared his loyalty to France. Toussaint declared himself "governor for life" and this outraged the new man in France, Napoleon Bonaparte. The beginning of this black revolution was kept quiet in many areas. For example, the Southern states closed their doors to immigration from the island and tried to keep the news of the black revolution from their slaves.¹⁰

In response to this declaration by Toussaint, Bonaparte sent troops to the island under the command of Leclerc. Bonaparte thought that the fighting would not take very much time. At first Leclerc was doing well seizing the major ports and capturing some high places. He wanted to move against the black insurgents from four directions that would separate them from each other and make it easier for his troops to conquer the smaller sections. Bonaparte was involved in many other areas of

¹⁰ Tim Mathewson, "Napoleon's Haitian Guerilla War," Military History 18, no. 6 (2002): 30.

the world and he told Leclerc to employ the art of deception when dealing with the blacks. Leclerc offered to the black generals freedom and appointments in the French military to all who capitulated.¹¹ Some took this offer and Toussaint's army began to fragment.

The main strength of the black army was their effectiveness at guerilla warfare. They knew the terrain well and were very effective at moving troops rapidly across the island. Hundreds of battles were fought and the blacks remained strong in spirit and troops. The French were succumbing to a yellow fever epidemic at an alarming rate. In the course of about nine months, some 10,000 French troops were dead.¹² Eventually Leclerc petitioned Toussaint to meet together and Toussaint accepted. Leclerc seized Toussaint and had him taken off the island to some French fortress. There Toussaint died on April 27, 1803. His second in command, a man named Dessalines, took over the control of the black forces. After losing huge numbers of troops to sickness, the French negotiated with Dessalines for their evacuation.

Dessalines quickly took control over the island and on January 1, 1804 declared the colony's independence. This

¹¹ Mathewson, 32.

¹² Ibid

was the first republic to win its independence in the western hemisphere after the United States. Dessalines then ordered all of the remaining French on the island to be put to death.

The victory of independence was not a cure all for Haiti. They were not recognized as a sovereign state for many years. This was a time of slavery in the U.S. and not only in the U.S. Many of the Caribbean islands were still colonies being worked by slaves. Brazil was still importing and using slaves as well. This severely hindered Haiti's growth as a sovereign state. With little capital to buy goods, build buildings, or invest in the economic sector, Haiti was reserved to getting by on its own. Not officially being recognized did not allow Haiti to legally trade with the surrounding nations, many who still allowed slavery.

In twelve years Haiti was a nation that had destroyed colonialism, ended slavery, and proclaimed racial equality. Throughout this devastating struggle they destroyed one of the Caribbean's most productive economies, and eliminated its ruling class.¹³ They have had constant struggles with dictatorships, and poverty. I feel that if they would have been more patient, their economic situation would be better

¹³ Langley, 102.

than it is today. The evidence of the surrounding Caribbean islands, though not economic powerhouses, are better off both politically and economically than current day Haiti.

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