

San Domingo

The history of the Negro in his relation to European civilization falls into two divisions, the Negro in Africa and the Negro in America and the West Indies. Up to the 'eighties of the last century, only one-tenth of Africa was in the hands of Europeans. Until that time, therefore, it is the attempt of the Negro in the Western World to free himself from his burdens which has political significance in Western history. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century European civilization turned again to Africa, this time not for slaves to work the plantations of America but for actual control of territory and population. Today (1938) the position of Africans in Africa is one of the major problems of contemporary politics. An attempt is made here

to give some account and analysis of Negro revolts through the centuries; in the days of slavery; in Africa during the last half-century; and in America and the West Indies today.

It is impossible in this space to deal with the slave-trade and slavery; the same consideration has made it necessary to omit accounts of the early revolts in the West Indies and the incessant guerrilla warfare carried on in all the islands by the maroons (or runaway slaves) against their former masters. Negroes have continually revolted and once in Dutch Guiana the revolting slaves held almost the entire colony for months. But in the eighteenth century the greatest colony in the West Indies was French San Domingo (now Haiti) and there took place the most famous of all Negro revolts. It forms a useful starting point.

1789 is a landmark in the history of Negro revolt in the West Indies. The only successful Negro revolt, the only successful slave revolt in history, had its roots in the French Revolution, and without the French Revolution its success would have been impossible.

During the eighteenth century French San Domingo developed a fabulous prosperity and by 1789 was taking 40,000 slaves a year. In 1789 the total foreign trade of Britain was twenty-seven million pounds, of which the colonial trade accounted for only five million pounds. The total foreign trade of France was seventeen million pounds, of which San Domingo alone was responsible for eleven millions. "Sad irony of human history," comments Jaures, "the fortunes created at Bordeaux, at Nantes, by the slave-trade gave to the bourgeoisie that pride which needed liberty and contributed to human emancipation." But the colonial system of the eighteenth century ordained that whatever manufactured goods the colonists needed could be bought only in France. They could sell their produce only to France. The goods were to be transported only in French ships. Colonial planters and the Home Government were thus in bitter and constant conflict, the very conflict which had resulted in the American War of Independence. The American colonists gained their freedom in 1783, and in less than five years the British attitude to the slave-trade changed.

Previous to 1783 they had been the most successful practitioners of the slave-trade in the world. But now not only was America

gone, but it was British ships which were supplying a large proportion of the 40,000 slaves a year which were the basis of San Domingo's prosperity. The trade of San Domingo almost doubled between 1783 and 1789. The British West Indian colonies were in comparison poor, and with the loss of America, were of diminishing importance. The monopoly of the West Indian sugar planters galled the rising industrial bourgeoisie, potential free-traders. Adam Smith and Arthur Young, economists of the coming industrial age, condemned the expensiveness of slave labor. India offered the example of a country where the laborer cost only a penny a day, did not have to be bought, and did not brand his master as a slave-owner. In 1787 the Abolitionist Society was formed and the British Government, which only a few years before had threatened to sack a Governor of Jamaica if he tampered with the slave-trade in any shape or form, now changed its mind. If the slave-trade was brought to a sudden close, San Domingo would be ruined. The British islands would lose nothing, for they had as many slaves as they seemed likely to need. The abolitionists it is true worked very hard, and Clarkson, for instance, was a very honest and sincere man. Many people were moved by their propaganda. But that a considerable and influential section of British men of business thought that the slave-trade was not only a blot on the national name but a growing hole in the national pocket, was the point that mattered. The evidence for this is given in detail in the writer's *Black Jacobins* published in 1938 with a revised edition in 1963.

The Abolition Society was formed in 1787. France at that time was stirring with the revolution, and the French humanitarians formed a parallel society, "The Friends of the Negro." They preached the abolition not only of the slave-trade but of slavery as well, and Brissot, Mirabeau, Condorcet, Robespierre, many of the great names of the revolution, were among the members. They ignored or minimized the fact that, unlike Britain, two-thirds of France's overseas trade was bound up with the traffic. Wilberforce and Clarkson encouraged them, gave the society money, and did active propaganda in France. This was the position in Europe when the French Revolution began.

San Domingo possessed at that time 500,000 slaves, and only 30,000 Mulattoes and about the same number of whites. But the

slave-owners of San Domingo at once embraced the revolution, and as each section interpreted liberty, equality and fraternity to suit itself, civil war was soon raging between them. Some of the rich whites, especially those who owed debts to French merchants, wanted to follow the example of America and virtually rule themselves. The Mulattoes wanted to be rid of their disabilities, the poor whites wanted to become masters and officials like the rich whites. These classes fought fiercely with one another. The white colonists lynched and murdered Mulattoes for daring to claim equality. But the whites themselves were divided into royalists and revolutionaries. The French revolutionary legislatures first of all evaded the question of Mulatto rights, then gave some of the Mulattoes rights, then took the rights away again. Mulattoes and whites fought, and under the stress of necessity began to arm their slaves. The news from France, the slogans of liberty, equality and fraternity, the political excitement in San Domingo, the civil war between rich whites, poor whites and Mulattoes, it was these things which after two years awoke the sleeping slaves to revolution. By July, 1791, in the thickly populated North they were planning a rising.

The slaves worked on the land, and, like revolutionary peasants everywhere, they aimed at the extermination of their masters. But, working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar-factories which covered the North Plain, they were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at that time, and the rising was, therefore, a thoroughly prepared and organized mass movement.

On a night in August a tropical storm raged, with lightning and gusts of wind and heavy showers of rain. Carrying torches to light their way, the leaders of the revolt met in an open space in the thick forests of the Morne Rouge, a mountain overlooking Cap François, the largest town. There Boukman, the leader, after Voodoo incantations and the sucking of the blood of a stuck pig, gave the last instructions.

That very night they began. Each slave-gang murdered its masters and burnt the plantation to the ground. The slaves destroyed tirelessly. They knew that as long as those plantations stood, their lot would be to labor on them until they dropped.

They violated all the women who fell into their hands, often on the bodies of their still bleeding husbands, fathers and brothers. But they did not maintain this vengeful spirit for long. As the revolution gained territory they spared many of the men, women and children whom they surprised on plantations. To prisoners of war alone they remained merciless. They tore out their flesh with red-hot pincers, they roasted them on slow fires, they sawed a carpenter between his boards. Yet on the whole, they never approached in their tortures the savageries to which they themselves had been subjected.

The white planters refused to take the slave revolt seriously. They continued to intrigue against the Mulattoes and to threaten the French Government. But as the chaos grew, the rich royalists swallowed their color prejudice and united with the Mulattoes against the revolutionary planters. Meanwhile the insurrection prospered, until a few weeks after it began there were about a hundred thousand revolting slaves divided into large bands. The leaders were Jean-Francois and Biassou, and Toussaint L'Ouverture joined them a month after the revolt began. He was forty-six, first his master's coachman and afterward, owing to his intelligence, placed in charge of the livestock on the estate, a post usually held by a white man. He had a smattering of education, but he could not write correct French, and usually spoke Creole i.e. the local French patois.

Baffled in their first spring at the city, these leaders did not know what to do, and when the French Government sent Commissioners who boasted of the armed forces (quite imaginary) which were on their way, the Negro leaders sought to betray their followers. They wrote to the Commissioners promising that in return for the freedom of a few hundred they would cooperate in leading the others back into slavery and would join in hunting down the recalcitrant. Toussaint, in charge of the negotiations, reduced the offer from 400 to 60. The French Commissioners gladly accepted, but the white planters with great scorn refused. Toussaint therefore gave up hopes of even a treacherous solution and began to train a small band of soldiers from among the hordes.

The French legislature was by this time under the leadership of Brissot and the Girondins. These managed to persuade the co-

lonial interests that it was to their advantage to give all rights to the Mulattoes, and in April 1792, this became law. But Brissot, doughty propagandist for abolition before he came to power, now would not go a step further than rights for Mulattoes. Far from abolishing slavery, he and his government dispatched a force to crush the slave revolt. These troops landed in San Domingo, but before they could begin the attack, events had occurred in Paris which altered the whole course of the French Revolution, and with it, the black revolution in San Domingo.

On August 10, 1792, the Paris masses, tired of the equivocations and indecision of the Parliamentarians, stormed the Tuileries and dragged the Bourbons off the throne. A wave of enthusiasm for liberty swept over France and from indifference to slavery at the beginning of the revolution, revolutionary France now hated no section of the aristocracy so much as the colonial whites, "the aristocrats of the skin." In San Domingo the news of August 10 so split the slave-owners that the civil war between them which had ended began again. Every conflict among the slave-owners was a source of added strength to the slaves.

By February 1793 war had broken out between revolutionary France and England and Spain. The Spaniards in Spanish San Domingo from the start had helped the slaves against the French. Now they offered them a formal alliance and the slaves trooped over to join Spain. Whether France was a republic or reactionary monarchy, made no difference to the colonial slave if each was prepared to keep him in slavery. Toussaint L'Ouverture went with the others but he secretly offered to the French the services of his trained band if they would abolish slavery. They refused. He made a similar offer to the Spanish commander who likewise refused. Toussaint decided to stay where he was and watch developments. Sonthonax, the French Commissioner, at his wits' end, threatened by Britain and Spain and increasingly deserted by the French blacks, abolished slavery as his last chance of gaining some support. His maneuver failed. Toussaint remained with the Spaniards and won most of the North Province for them. For the planters, abolition was the last straw and they offered the colony to Pitt, who dispatched an expedition from Europe to capture the French colonies in the West Indies. The British carried all before

them, and by June 1794 over two-thirds of San Domingo and almost every French island of importance were in the hands of the British. The rest seemed only a matter of days.

But meanwhile the revolution had been rising in France. Before the end of 1793 Brissot had been swept out of power. Robespierre and the Mountain ruled and led the revolution against its enemies at home and abroad. By this time all revolutionary France had embraced the cause of the slaves, many refusing even to touch coffee as being drenched with the blood of their own human kind. On February 4, 1794, the Convention abolished slavery without a debate. "The English are beaten," shouted Danton. "Pitt and his plots are riddled." The great master of revolutionary tactics had seen far. The British fleet prevented assistance going to the hard pressed colored revolution but the decree of abolition would throw the blacks wholeheartedly on the side of the French. Toussaint joined the French at once, and slaughtered his Spanish allies, white and black, of yesterday; while in Martinique, Guadeloupe, and the other French colonies, the black slaves, singing the *Ça Ira* and the *Marseillaise* and dressed in the colors of the Republic, began to drive the British out of the French islands, and then carried the war into British territory.

Spain made peace, in 1795, and by 1799 the British had been driven out of San Domingo and most of the French colonies by Negro slaves and Mulattoes. Fortescue, the Tory historian of the British army, gives a vivid account of this colossal disaster. Britain lost 100,000 men in the West Indies in these four years, two and a half times as many as Wellington lost in the whole of the Peninsular War. Fever took a heavy toll, but Toussaint L'Ouverture, and Rigaud, a Mulatto, in San Domingo; and Victor Hugues, a Mulatto, in Martinique and the smaller islands, won one of the most important victories in the French revolutionary wars. Aided by the fever, they, in Fortescue's phrase, "practically destroyed the British army." For six years Britain was tied up in the West Indies, and to quote Fortescue once more, if Britain played so insignificant a part in the attack on revolutionary France in Europe during the first six years of the war, the answer is to be found in "the two fatal words, San Domingo." The part played by the blacks in the success of the great French Revolution has never

received adequate recognition. The revolution in Europe will neglect colored workers at its peril.

With the British driven out, L'Ouverture occupied a powerful position. He was Commander-in-Chief, appointed by the French Government, of a French army, with white officers under him. But as soon as the British were driven out, the French started to intrigue against him. They engineered a quarrel between himself and Rigaud, the Mulatto, whence was fought a bitter civil war. Toussaint was victorious, then brought Spanish San Domingo under his control. He established a strong government over the whole island, drew up a constitution which made him First Consul for life, and gave San Domingo "dominion status"; concentrating all the power in his own hands, he governed. In eighteen months he had restored a colony, devastated by years of civil war, to two-thirds of its former prosperity. He was a despot, confining his laborers to the plantations and brooking no interference with his will under harsh penalties. But he protected the laborers from the injustice of their former owners. He saw that they were paid their wages. He established free trade and religious toleration, abolished racial discrimination, tried to lay the foundations of an educational system, sent young Mulattoes and Negroes to France to be educated so as to return and be able to govern. He treated the whites with exceptional consideration and courtesy, so much so that the black laborers began to lose confidence in him. Too confident of his influence over the blacks, he sacrificed his popularity to please the French.

But the political situation in France had changed for the worse. The revolution had stabilized itself under Bonaparte. And Bonaparte sought to restore slavery. He sent an expedition under his brother-in-law Leclerc which finally amounted to nearly 60,000 men. Toussaint vacillated at first, then fought and finally came to terms. Captured by a trick he was sent to France, and died in an Alpine prison. But as soon as Bonaparte's plans for the restoration of slavery and all the discrimination of the old regime became known, the population, which had been partially deceived by Leclerc's false proclamations, revolted. Dessalines, one of Toussaint's lieutenants, had by this time seen what Toussaint never saw, that only independence could guarantee freedom. The

Mulattoes, who had previously supported Bonaparte, joined the blacks, and together they fought a desperate war of independence. To win they had almost to destroy the island. France, from casualties in battle and fever, suffered the loss of over 50,000 men. The cruelties practiced by the French during the last stages of the civil war exceeded in barbarism the worst of the old slavery days. Dessalines, uncultured and lacking Toussaint's genius, led his people with a ruthlessness quite equal to that of the French.

The attitude of the whites toward changes in the San Domingo regime throws a valuable light on race prejudice. Before the revolution Negroes were so despised that white women undressed before them as one undresses today before a dog or a cat. Ten years after, when former slaves were now ruling the country, most of the whites accepted the new regime, fraternized with the ex-slave generals and dined at their tables; while the white women, members of some of the proudest families of the French aristocracy, threw themselves recklessly at the black dictator, sent him locks of hair, keepsakes, passionate letters, etc. To the laboring Negroes, however, they showed as much of their old hostility as they dared. When the Leclerc expedition came, the whites rushed to join it, and took a leading part in the gladiatorial shows where dogs ate living Negroes, etc. But when they saw that Leclerc's expedition was doomed to defeat, they disentangled themselves from it and turned again to the blacks. Dessalines, the new dictator, declared the island independent, but promised them their properties. This was enough for them. When the French commanders were about to evacuate the island they offered the white colonists places on the boats. The colonists refused, being quite content to continue living under blacks who were no longer French even in allegiance: the San Domingo blacks gave their island its old Carib name, Haiti, to emphasize the break with France.

But the British and the Americans, themselves the greatest slave-holders in the world, were all for the victory of the blacks in order to drive out the French. All through Leclerc's campaign the British and American newspapers cursed the French and praised Toussaint and the blacks. That Frenchmen should remain in the island did not suit them. While Dessalines, who hated the whites for their accumulated treacheries, wanted to kill as many as pos-

sible, Christophe and Clairveaux, his two trusted lieutenants, disapproved, and the great bulk of the people wanted no more bloodshed. But Cathcart, an English agent in San Domingo, told Dessalines that the British would neither trade with him nor accord him their protection unless every Frenchman were killed. Not long after the French were massacred. M. Camille Guy tells the story and gives his original sources in pamphlet No. 3 of the *Bulletin de geographic*, published in Paris in 1898. There too he gives details of the presents that were sent to Dessalines for his coronation from London in a British cruiser and from America. Needless to say, in most books on this subject, black Dessalines bears the sole responsibility for this massacre.

The success of the San Domingo blacks killed the West Indian slave-trade and slavery. France hoped for many years that she would regain the colony. The Haitians let her know that they would resist to the last man and burn everything to the ground. France therefore resigned herself to the loss and with the removal of San Domingo from the West Indian trade, abolition of the slave-trade in 1807 and of slavery in 1834 followed. The English planters fought hard but history was against them. The revolution in France in 1848, during its short-lived span of success, abolished slavery in the French colonies.

The San Domingo revolution is the only successful Negro revolt, and therefore the reasons for that success must be noted. First the blacks themselves fought magnificently and glowing tributes have been paid to them by their opponents. But many had fought well before and have fought well since. They were fortunate in that they had had time to organize themselves as soldiers. And this was due to the fact that they not only received inspiration from the revolution in France but between 1794 and 1797 had active support from revolutionary France. Such supplies and reinforcements as did actually arrive were comparatively small, but were directed toward assisting and not retarding the slave revolution. This was the decisive factor. The international situation also helped them. But the conflict between Britain and France, then between France on the one hand and Spain on the other was also the result of the revolution. During the last campaign, at a very critical moment, the

declaration of war between France and Britain, after the short interval which followed the Treaty of Amiens, made the victory of the San Domingo blacks inevitable. But the blacks maneuvered with great skill. The Spaniards, and in the later stages after their defeat, the British, both offered terms to the blacks with the secret intention of turning upon them afterward and restoring slavery. Maitland, the British general, says so very clearly in his letter to the Foreign Secretary, Dundas, dated December 26, 1798, and preserved in the Public Record Office. But Toussaint never compromised himself with the British. While taking from them as much assistance as was convenient, he refused any entangling alliances. He thus made the most skillful use of imperialist contradictions when revolutionary France, crushed, was no longer able to assist him.

There remains to be noted a certain aspect of the struggle which though derivative is yet of extreme importance. During the revolutionary period the blacks fought under the slogans of liberty and equality. They embraced the revolutionary doctrine, they thought in republican terms. The result was that these slaves, lacking education, half-savage, and degraded in their slavery as only centuries of slavery can degrade, achieved a liberality in social aspiration and an elevation of political thought equivalent to anything similar that took place in France. Hundreds of Toussaint's letters, proclamations, etc., are preserved, some in the national archives in France, others in San Domingo. Papers of contemporary blacks and Mulattoes also exist. Christophe and Dessalines, who shared the leadership with Toussaint, were quite illiterate, slaves sprung from the ranks. But they and their fellow officers not only acted but spoke and dictated like highly-trained modern revolutionaries.

Some examples should be given. All the blacks did not join the French. Some remained with the Spanish rulers of Spanish San Domingo. The leader of these, full of racial pride, rejected the overtures of the French and told Laveaux, the French Commander, that he would only believe in his pretended equality when he saw Monsieur Laveaux and gentlemen of his quality giving their daughters in marriage to Negroes. But the blacks who were republican had the utmost scorn for the blacks who were

royalist. Witness the following proclamation in reply to overtures made on behalf of the Spanish authorities by the blacks who supported royalism.

We are republicans and, in consequence, free by natural right. It can only be Kings whose very name expresses what is most vile and low, who dared to arrogate the right of reducing to slavery men made like themselves, whom nature had made free.

The King of Spain furnishes you abundantly with arms and ammunition. Use them to tighten your chains. . . . As for us, we have no need for more than stones and sticks to make you dance the Carmapole. . . .

You have received commissions and you have guarantees. Guard your liveries and your parchments. One day they will serve you as the fastidious titles of our former aristocrats served them. If the King of the French who drags his misery from court to court has need of slaves to assist him in his magnificence, let him go seek it among other Kings who count as many slaves as they have subjects.

When Toussaint L'Ouverture began to suspect in 1797 that the French Government was now the representative of forces which might ultimately aim at the restoration of slavery, he addressed to them a letter which seems to come straight from the pen of Mirabeau, Danton or Robespierre, instead of from a slave who dictated in the local patois and then had his thoughts written and rewritten until his secretaries had achieved the form which he desired.

Do they think that men who have been able to enjoy the blessing of liberty will calmly see it snatched away? They supported their chains only so long as they did not know any condition of life more happy than that of slavery. But today when they have left it, if they had a thousand lives they would sacrifice them all rather than be forced into slavery again. But no, the same hand which has broken our chains will not enslave us

anew. France will not revoke her principles, she will not withdraw from us the greatest of her benefits. She will protect us from all our enemies; she will not permit her sublime morality to be perverted, those principles which do her most honor to be destroyed, her most beautiful achievement to be degraded, her Decree of the 16th Pluviose which so honors humanity to be revoked. *But if, to re-establish slavery in San Domingo, this was done, then I declare to you it would be to attempt the impossible: we have known how to face dangers to obtain our liberty, we shall know how to brave death to maintain it.* (Italics his own.)

This, Citizen Directors, is the morale of the people of San Domingo, those are the principles that they transmit to you by me.

My own you know. It is sufficient to renew, my hand in yours, the oath that I have made, to cease to live before gratitude dies in my heart, before I cease to be faithful to France and to my duty, before the god of liberty is profaned and sullied by the liberticides, before they can snatch from my hands that sword, those arms, which France confided to me “for the defense of its rights and those of humanity, for the triumph of liberty and equality.”

Race prejudice was rampant before the revolution and blacks and Mulattoes hated each other as much as did the blacks and whites. Yet by 1799 when the civil war was about to begin between the blacks of the North and West and the Mulattoes of the South, a civil war based on the different social interests of the two classes, Rigaud the Mulatto leader, instead of emphasizing the difference in color as Mulattoes always did before the revolution, now defended himself with moving passion against the conception that he was hostile to Toussaint, the Commander-in-Chief, because Toussaint was a Negro.

Indeed, if I had reached the stage where I would not wish to obey a black, if I had the stupid presumption to believe that I am above such obedience, on what grounds could I claim obedience from the whites? What a grievous example would I be giving to those

placed under my orders? Besides, is there so great a difference between the color of the Commander-in-Chief and mine? Is it a tint of color, more or less dark, which instills principles of philosophy or gives merit to an individual? . . . I have consecrated my life to the defense of the blacks. From the beginning of the revolution I have braved all for the cause of liberty. I have not betrayed my principles and I shall never do so. Besides, I am too much a believer in the Rights of Man to think that there is one color in nature superior to another. I know a man only as a man.

The revolution under the encouragement of the French revolutionaries seemed to have created a new nation. The great tragedy of San Domingo was that as the revolution in France retreated before reaction, the old slave-owners regained influence and harassed the exhausted blacks.