

Reference: The Haitian Revolution of 1791-1803

An Historical Essay in Four Parts

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The colony of San Domingue, roughly the same land mass that is today Haiti, was the richest colony in the West Indies and probably the richest colony in the history of the world. Driven by slave labor and enabled by fertile soil and ideal climate, San Domingue produced sugar, coffee, cocoa, indigo, tobacco, cotton, sisal as well as some fruits and vegetables for the motherland, France.

When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, there were four distinct sets of interest groups in San Domingue, with distinct sets of interests and even some important distinctions within these many categories:

THE WHITES

There were approximately 20,000 whites, mainly French, in San Domingue. They were divided into two main groups:

Planters

These were wealthy whites who owned plantations and many slaves. Since their wealth and position rested entirely on the slave economy they were united in support of slavery. They were, by 1770, extremely disenchanted with France. Their complaint was almost identical with the complaints that led the North American British to rebel against King George in 1776 and declare their independence. That is, the metropole (France), imposed strict laws on the colony prohibiting any trading with any partner except France. Further, the colonists had no formal representation with the French government.

Virtually all the planters violated the laws of France and carried on an illegal trade especially with the fledgling nation, the United States of America. Most of the planters leaned strongly toward independence for San Domingue along the same lines as the U.S., that is, a slave nation governed by white males.

It is important to note at the outset that this group was revolutionary, independence-minded and defiant of the laws of France.

Petit blancs

The second group of whites were less powerful than the planters. They were artisans, shop keepers, merchants, teachers and various middle and underclass whites. They often had a few slaves, but were not wealthy like the planters.

They tended to be less independence-minded and more loyal to France.

However, they were committed to slavery and were especially anti-black, seeing free persons of color as serious economic and social competitors.

THE FREE PERSONS OF COLOR

There were approximately 30,000 free persons of color in 1789. About half of them were mulattoes, children of white Frenchmen and slave women. These mulattoes were often freed by their father-masters in some sort of paternal guilt or concern. These mulatto children were usually feared by the slaves since the masters often displayed unpredictable behavior toward them, at times recognizing them as their children and demanding special treatment, at other times wishing to deny their existence. Thus the slaves wanted nothing to do with the mulattoes if possible.

The other half of the free persons of color were black slaves who

had purchased their own freedom or been given freedom by their masters for various reasons.

The free people of color were often quite wealthy, certainly usually more wealthy than the petit blancs (thus accounting for the distinct hatred of the free persons of color on the part of the petit blancs), and often even more wealthy than the planters.

The free persons of color could own plantations and owned a large portion of the slaves. They often treated their slaves poorly and almost always wanted to draw distinct lines between themselves and the slaves. Free people of color were usually strongly pro-slavery.

There were special laws which limited the behavior of the free people of color and they did not have rights as citizens of France. Like the planters, they tended to lean toward independence and to wish for a free San Domingue which would be a slave nation in which they could be free and independent citizens. As a class they certainly regarded the slaves as much more their enemies than they did the whites.

Culturally the free people of color strove to be more white than the whites. They denied everything about their African and black roots. They dressed as French and European as the law would allow, they were well educated in the French manner, spoke French and denigrated the Creole language of the slaves. They were scrupulous Catholics and denounced the Voodoo religion of Africa. While the whites treated them badly and scorned their color, they nonetheless strove to imitate every thing white, seeing this a way of separating themselves from the status of the slaves whom they despised.

THE BLACK SLAVES

There were some 500,000 slaves on the eve of the French Revolution. This means the slaves outnumbered the free people by about 10-1. In general the slave system in San Domingue was especially cruel. In the pecking order of slavery one of the most frightening threats to recalcitrant slaves in the rest of the Americas was to threaten to sell them to San Domingue. Nonetheless, there was an important division among the slaves which will account for some divided behavior of the slaves in the early years of the revolution.

Domestic slaves

About 100,000 of the slaves were domestics who worked as cooks, personal servants and various artisans around the plantation manor, or in the towns. These slaves were generally better treated than the common field hands and tended to identify more fully with their white and mulatto masters. As a class they were longer in coming into the anti-slave revolution, and often, in the early years, remained loyal to their owners.

Field hands

The 400,000 field hands were the slaves who had the harshest and most hopeless lives. They worked from sun up to sun down in the difficult climate of San Domingue. They were inadequately fed, with virtually no medical care, not allowed to learn to read or write and in general were treated much worse than the work animals on the plantation. Despite French philosophical positions which admitted the human status of slaves (something which the Spanish, United States and British systems did NOT do at this time), the French slave owners found it much easier to replace slaves by purchasing new ones than in worrying much to preserve the lives of existing slaves.

THE MAROONS

There was a large group of run-away slaves who retreated deep into the mountains of San Domingue. They lived in small villages where they did subsistence farming and kept alive African ways, developing African architecture, social relations, religion and customs. They were bitterly anti-slavery, but alone, were not willing to fight the fight for freedom. They did supplement their subsistence farming with occasional raids on local plantations, and maintained defense systems to resist planter forays to capture and reenslave them.

It is hard to estimate their numbers, but most scholars believe there were tens of thousands of them prior to the Revolution of 1791. Actually two of the leading generals of the early slave revolution were maroons.

PRE-REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS AND COMPLEX ALLIANCES

The French Revolution of 1789 In France was the spark which lit the Haitian Revolution of 1791. But, prior to that spark there was a great deal of dissatisfaction with the Metropolitan France and that dissatisfaction created some very strange alliances and movements.

THE INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

France enforced a system called the "exclusif" on San Domingue. This required that San Domingue sold 100% of her exports to France alone, and purchased 100% of her imports from France alone. The French merchants and crown set the prices for both imports and exports, and the prices were extraordinarily favorable to France and in no way competitive with world markets. It was virtually the same system as that which England had forced on its North American colonies and which finally sparked the

independence movement in these colonies.

Like the North Americans, the San Domingians did not abide strictly by the law. A contraband trade grew up with the British in Jamaica and especially with British North America, and after its successful revolution, the United States. The Americans wanted molasses from San Domingue for their burgeoning rum distilleries, and San Domingue imported huge quantities of low quality dried fish to feed the slaves. Nonetheless, the planters (both white and the free people of color) chafed under the oppression of France's exclusif. There was a growing independence movement, and in this movement the white planters were united with the free people of color. It was a curious alliance, since the whites continued to oppress the free people of color in their social life, but formed a coalition with them on the political and economic front.

The petit blancs remained mainly outside this coalition, primarily because they were not willing to form any sort of alliance with any people of color, free or not. The petit blancs were avowed racists and were especially offended and threatened by the elevated economic status of most of the free people of color.

It is important to note that this independence movement did not include the slaves in any way whatsoever. Those who were a party to the movement were avowed slave owners and their vision of a free San Domingue was like the United States, a slave owning nation.

SLAVE REBELLIONS

Simultaneously there were constant slave rebellions. The slaves never willingly submitted to their status and never quit fighting it. The slave owners, both white and people of color, feared the slaves

and knew that the incredible concentration of slaves (the slaves outnumbered the free people 10-1) required exceptional control. This, in part, accounts for the special harshness and cruelty of slavery in San Domingue. The owners tried to keep slaves of the same tribes apart; they forbade any meetings of slaves at all; they tied slaves rigorously to their own plantations, brutally punished the slightest manifestation of non-cooperation and employed huge teams of harsh overseers.

Nonetheless the slaves fought back in whatever way they could. One of the few weapons the masters could not control were poisons, which grew wild in San Domingue, the knowledge of which the slaves brought with them from Africa. The history of slavery in San Domingue, like that of slavery everywhere, is a history of constant rebellion and resistance. One of the most famous and successful revolutions prior to 1791 was the Mackandal rebellion of 1759. The slave Mackandal, a houngan knowledgeable of poisons, organized a widespread plot to poison the masters, their water supplies and animals. The movement spread great terror among the slave owners and killed hundreds before the secret of Mackandal was tortured from a slave. The rebellion was crushed and Mackandal brutally put to death. But, it reflects the constant fear in which the slave owners lived, and explains the brutality of their system of control.

The slave rebellions were without allies among either the whites or free people of color. They were not even fully united among themselves, and the domestic slaves especially tended to be more loyal to their masters.

The maroons, in the meantime, were in contact with rebellious slaves, but they had few firm alliances. Nonetheless, their hatred of slavery, their fear of being re-enslaved and their desire to be free and safe in their own country, made them ready allies were a serious slave revolution to begin.

THE EARLIEST PERIOD OF THE REVOLUTION 1789-

1791

The Revolution in France, 1789 ...

It is necessary to remind the readers briefly of what was going on in France at this time. Prior to the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, France was ruled by a king. King Louis XVI and his queen Marie Antoinette were only two in a long line of greedy monarches who cared little about their people. Nonetheless, a movement for a general concept of human rights, universal citizenship and participation in government had developed among the intellectuals and was taking root among the common people. This movement finally broke into full revolution in 1789 and ordinary citizens, for the first time in France's history, had the rights of citizenship.

People in France were divided into two camps, the red cockades, those in favor of the revolution and the white cockades, those loyal to the system of monarchy. (This had to do with the color of the hats they wore.) This whole social upheaval had a necessary impact on San Domingue, and people had to begin to choose up sides.

In France the tendency was to be a revolutionary or a monarchist, and to remain fairly strongly within that camp. In San Domingue, however, things were much more fluid. Not only were all the issues which plagued France being played out, but the additional issues of the independence movement, the movement toward rights for free people of color and the question of slavery. This caused San Domingians to shift from the side of the revolution to the side of monarchy and vice versa with blinding suddenness, and makes following the line-up of whose on whose side very difficult. It always depends on WHEN in the revolution you are speaking.

THE FREE PERSONS OF COLOR

The revolution progressed quickly in France, and on August 26, 1789 the newly convened Estates General (a general parliament of the people) passed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. This declaration immediately raised the question of slavery.

The Amis des Noirs (Friend of the Blacks).

In 1787 an anti-slavery society was founded in France. It was modelled after the anti-slavery society of England and influenced by Thomas Clarkson. They also had strong contacts with American abolitionists. They wanted the gradual elimination of slavery, yet they wanted the retention of France's prosperous West Indian colonies. After the declaration of rights, they were forced to make important decisions on where they stood. Rather than address the question of slavery, they decided to follow their gradualist position and to address the question of free persons of color.

There was a strong case to make for this group. The slaves were properly and thus the question of their humanity could be put on the back burner. Human Rights were something for white French males, not for blacks or property-less French men or any women. However, the free persons of color were a different matter all together. Not only were they not property, but were themselves property owners and tax payers. The Amis des Noirs decided that this would be the place to begin their battle, not with the question of the abolition of slavery itself.

On March 28, 1790 the General Assembly in Paris passed an ambiguous piece of legislation. While the various colonies were given a relatively free hand in local government, an amendment required that "all the proprietors... ought to be active citizens. The amendment was both too much and not enough. It seemed to possibly exclude the petit blancs, thus increasing their anger against the free persons of color, and, on the other hand, it seemed to argue for citizenship for free persons of color who were property owners -- which was most of them.

Back in San Domingue there were two separate issues, each demanding different and contradictory alliances. It was these conflicting demands on peoples' loyalties which caused much of the shifting about in these early years. On the one hand the petit blancs and the white planters formed an uneasy union against the French bureaucrats. The issue was independence and local control. The bureaucrats were seen as strongly pro-French. Thus the battle lines were drawn on the basis of loyalty to the new revolution in France. All the whites of San Domingue began to sport the red cockade of the revolution, and the French bureaucrats were painted with the white cockade of French monarchy.

However, this was an uneasy alliance. The white planters were not revolutionaries in the French sense at all. Nor did they want full rights for the petit blancs. It was a doomed alliance and didn't last long.

On the other hand, the natural allies of the white planter's were the free people of color. Both were from the wealthy class, both supported independence and slavery and neither wanted to change the traditional control of society by wealthy propertied people. The change would have been to allow the wealthy free persons of color their share in power, wealth and social prestige in this union. This was extremely difficult for the white planters to do until it was too late.

Some saw this necessity, but couldn't convince the others. One white planter argued: 'Win over the gens de couleur class to your cause. They surely could not ask for more than conforming their interests with yours, and of employing themselves with the zeal for common security. It is therefore only a question of being just to them and of treating them better and better.'" But, of course, this advice went unheeded and the coalitions all broke down in due course.

The immediate result of the General Assembly meeting was for San Domingue to bring the white population to the brink of a three-sided civil war. The petit blancs formed a Colonial Assembly at St. Marc for home rule. The white planters saw this was totally against their interests, thus they withdrew and formed their own assembly at Cape Francois (today Cape Haitien). At the same time this split between the two colonial white groups gave strength to the French government officials who had lost effective control of the colony. Each of the three forces were poised to strike against the other. Yet, in the crazy contradictions of this whole situation, the petit blancs and white planters each carried on their own private war of terror against the free people of color.

Rich San Domingue mulatto, Vincent Oge had been in Paris during the debates of March, 1790. He had tried to be seated as a delegate from San Domingue and was rebuffed. He and other San Dominguan men of color had tried to get the General Assembly to specify that the provision for citizenship included the free persons of color. Having failed in all of that, Oge resolved to return to San Domingue and one way or the other, by power of persuasion or power of arms, to force the issue of citizenship for free persons of color.

Oge visited the famous anti-slavery advocate Thomas Clarkson in England, then went to the United States to meet with leading abolitionists and to purchase arms and munitions. He returned to San Domingue and began to pursue his cause. Upon seeing that there was no hope to persuade the whites to allow their citizenship, Oge formed a military band with Jean-Baptist Chavannes. They set up headquarters in Grand Riviere, just east of Cape Francois and prepared to march on the stronghold of the colonists. It is important to note that Oge consciously rejected the help of black slaves. He wanted no part of any alliance with the slaves, and regarded them in the same way the whites did -- a property.