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The Rare Victory of a Slave Revolt: The Haitian Revolution

Introduction

What factors made the Haitian Revolution successful compared to previous slave revolts in Latin America? This paper seeks to answer that question. As a brief overview, The Haitian Revolution lasted from 1791 to 1804 and was the only successful slave revolt in history, let alone in Latin America. It led to the establishment of the independent Republic of Haiti, founded by formerly enslaved people with the abolition of slavery. In determining why the Haitian Revolution was successful, one must assess the significance of factors that led to its victory.

The Haitian Revolution's unparalleled success can be attributed to a rare set of circumstances, including Saint Domingue's cruel slavery conditions, the unity of the enslaved population, and ideas of liberty and equality from the French Revolution.

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to explore how the findings of the collected secondary sources are connected to the factors that led to the success of the Haitian Revolution, as compared to previous failed slave revolts in Latin America. In

Chapter 1 of *Twentieth-Century Latin American Revolutions* by Marc Becker, he briefly summarizes the Haitian Revolution as a topic under the Anticolonial revolts category. The point of bringing up the Haitian Revolution was because it is an example of the most thorough social revolution in which the social order was completely inverted. For illustration, the African plantation slaves then in the colony of Saint-Domingue overthrew the white planter class, which established a new government of formerly enslaved people. One of the reasons why, despite the Haitian Revolution taking thirteen years, it was successful is because it was the densest African slave population in the Americas. This means that enslaved Africans made up most of the Saint-Domingue's population, which led to a superiority of numbers against the planter class. The book also points out that Saint-Domingue "...was the richest colony in the Caribbean and supplied half of the world's sugar and coffee" (Becker 2017, 9). This provides insight into how vital the colony of Saint-Domingue was to France to defend it at all costs. Because of the colony's significance, the African slaves were exploited, overworked, and underfed, which led to their hatred of the planter class and a desire for freedom (Becker 2017, 9-10). While this chapter of the text briefly describes the Haitian Revolution through a social lens, it still conveys a simplified background on the state of slavery in Saint-Domingue and its dense African slave population. Thus, it shares two pivotal factors to the Haitian Revolution's success compared to previous slave revolts in Latin America.

The article "The Haitian Revolution: Successful Revolt by an Enslaved People" expresses the Haitian Revolution's background, causes, timeline, effects, and ultimate independence from France. The article shares that the French Revolution (1789) and

subsequent The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1791) drastically influenced the Haitian Revolution. Historian Franklin Knight called the Haitian Revolution the “inadvertent stepchild of the French Revolution” (Bodenheimer, 2019). Like Becker’s text, this article documents that Saint-Domingue was the most prosperous colony in the Americas and had a dense African slave population, with 80% of Saint-Domingue’s population enslaved. Moreover, it records the brutality of the colony’s conditions, with one-third of the 800,000 enslaved Africans imported to the island dying within the first few years of importation between 1680 and 1776 (Bodenheimer, 2019). Contributing to the background, Affranchis (free individuals composed of mixed-race) began their first armed revolt against the white planter class in October 1790 because white planters refused to recognize them as equals. Because of the fighting of the Haitian Revolution, the French National Assembly revoked limited rights granted to affranchis in September 1791, which only provoked the revolt. Between 1792 and 1802, the article explains that the Haitian Revolution was chaotic, where seven different factions warred simultaneously: enslaved Africans, affranchis, working-class Whites, elite Whites, and the Spanish, English, and French militaries. Because of the disarray of the factions, it is inferred that since the enslaved Africans had the most numbers considering the population, they could come on top in the revolution and secure their self-sovereignty. On a different note, Napoleon Bonaparte wished to reclaim control of Saint-Domingue and restore slavery, where he surprisingly received some support from enslaved Black people due to their opposition to Toussaint Ouverture’s perceived exploitativeness and lack of land reform. Due to this, the French’s Charles Leclerc invaded the colony in 1801, when many of Louverture’s top generals switched sides. He was forced to sign an armistice in May 1802. Leclerc betrayed the treaty's terms and

arrested and exiled Louverture to France, where he later died in prison in 1803. With this context in mind, the enslaved Africans and affranchis reignited the revolt against the French in late 1802 under the leadership of Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe, believing the French intended to restore slavery. One of the reasons for their victories against the French was the onset of yellow fever, which killed thousands of French soldiers, contributing to the attrition of the French army. Due to yellow fever, Napoleon Bonaparte's intention to restore slavery and the numerous warring factions contributed to the Haitian Revolution's success.

The scholar library "A Revolution in Haiti," made up of three different essays, conveys an overview of resistance before and during and the social triggers of the Haitian Revolution. The essay "Resistance and the Haitian Revolution" starts by debunking historical accounts written by white contemporaries who heavily downplayed the organization of enslaved Africans. The Black resistance had strong leadership, exemplary organization, and a unifying objective: abolishing slavery with human rights. The only way for resistance itself to be possible was when slavery itself was challenged by The Declaration of the Rights of Man passed in France. Since the document states, "In the eyes of the law all citizens are equal" (Bromley), revolutionary ideas spread to the sugar plantations and unified resistance due to its notions of liberty and equality. A Creole language and the Vodun religion supported unity among the enslaved Africans, which unified distinct ethnic groups into a unit. This essay concludes that "The brutality of white plantation owners towards their slaves culminated in a deep-rooted sense of anguish and resistance among the oppressed. Slave organization began prior to any French Revolutionary ideas, through religion, language, and mass gatherings in woods"

(Bromley, "A Revolution in Haiti). The zeal of the French Revolution's ideas and subsequent legislation granted an opportunity to abolish slavery in Saint-Domingue due to the white planter class dividing and confused from the shock of French Revolutionary concepts of equality of all and abolishment of slavery. The following essay of the scholar library, "Social Triggers of the Haitian Revolution," initially communicates that while the Haitian Revolution was not unique, as there were prior slave rebellions, the influence of the French Revolution inspired the slave resistance in Haiti to overthrow their oppressors. There were three distinct classes in Saint-Domingue: the white colonists, the free Mulattoes or affranchis, and the slaves who "...suffered under some of the harshest treatment found in the Caribbean" (Rand). The law bound enslaved Africans to be the property of the public and, with little choice, yielded obedience. As a result of the harsh conditions endured by enslaved Black people, they were ripe for the picking of a revolution but lacked the proper action to overthrow the oppressor class. On a slightly different topic, the Mulattoes, while free, held limited rights such as being outlawed from holding office and were forced to serve in a local militia without compensation after a 3-year mandatory enlistment in the military establishment (marechaussee) which arrested fugitive slaves and collected taxes while protecting travelers. With the extensive bitterness on the depravity of conditions for both enslaved Black people and Mulattoes, the French Revolution inspired their longing for freedom, and the revolt even occurred before the worse years of the French Revolution. This was because the Haitian revolutionaries were more concerned with the ideas put forth by the French Revolution rather than the outcome of it. With the circumstances set in stone for a revolt, Toussaint Louverture took charge of the movement and took in hundreds of slaves and free Mulattoes, which is a testament to his inspirational management. He

formed his army after discovering the ineptitude of local leaders of the rebellion, leading to hundreds more flocking to the ranks. Throughout the revolt, Toussaint displayed impressive military prowess for designing and personally leading his aggressive strategies and tactics that would eventually lead the Haitian Revolution to victory. As a final note from this essay, “The excesses of that contemptible treatment is the very reason why the Haitian Revolution was so successful: the treatment of slaves and Mulattoes in Haiti was so bad that it forced the most violent and ultimately, the most successful slave insurrection in history” (Rand). This scholarly library describes the factors that led to the Haitian Revolution’s success: the unity of enslaved Africans against slavery, competent military leadership and organization, the French Revolution’s ideas, and the brutality of conditions for slaves in Saint-Domingue.

The text “A Secret among the Blacks: Slave Resistance before the Haitian Revolution” analyzes the state of slave resistance in Saint-Domingue decades before the onset of the Haitian Revolution in 1791. The book tracks acts of resistance and defiance against colonial authorities starting as early as the 1720s. It illustrates how it grew in scope and size to form the Haitian Revolution. This text is like other sources in that “...arrangements defining the plantation economy of this resource-rich French colony was heading towards strife from the beginning” (Garrigus, 2023). Because of the plantation economy in Saint-Domingue, the enslaved population far exceeded the number of colonists and its forces. However, this text points out how the rivalry between France and Britain dictated the shift to the emancipation of the slaves. According to the text, “France’s war against Britain in today’s Canada meant that French shipments of provisions to the colony became infrequent at the start of hostilities and later impossible

considering Britain's ability to enforce an embargo" (Garrigus, 2023 "A Secret among the Blacks: Slave Resistance before the Haitian Revolution"). Because of the nature of the plantation economy, the white planter class assigned all the available farming space to cultivate the most profitable cash crops in the colony of sugar and coffee. This means enslaved people were denied the ability to tend to their gardens, and the small farming space they could find left them to starve. Resistance throughout the 18th century can also be traced back to times of severe drought when settlers, although underfed, were nothing compared to the extreme malnutrition of the enslaved people. This was due to the malicious colonial administration failing to provide adequate supplies to the colony's enslaved population, causing the life expectancy of enslaved people not to surpass eight years. False accusations of poison (anthrax) and hysteria about a slave revolt by the planter class only emboldened distrust between them and the enslaved Africans. The poison trials and the extreme malnutrition led to the enslaved people seeking mobilization behind strong leaders to resist abuse and oppression. After the Paris Peace Treaty of 1763 after the French and Indian War (Seven Years War), the planter class kept overworking the slaves to death, and as a result, drivers or principal slaves chosen to force other slaves to increase production only turned against their masters, leading to a mobilization of leadership to lead to an insurrection. Jean-Jacques was a principal slave at first and, just like others, reverted when their privileges were cut by their masters due to their excessive greed. The outcome was that the drivers were the paramount force leading up to the Haitian Revolution, rallying for acts of sabotage and strikes, ensuring that the plantations failed. Moreover, due to Medor and Makandal's secret societies or fraternities, they were able to convict thousands of slaves and free blacks to the path of emancipation at whatever cost. This source provides valuable

insight into how drivers, while initially reaping their privileges, transformed into the drivers of the Haitian Revolution in the decades before in an ironic sense.

In the text “The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804): A Different Route to Emancipation,” the professor examines the Haitian Revolution’s path to emancipation and abolition of slavery compared to the United States. This text, along with the other sources in this review, also examines the dense slave population of Saint-Domingue, the colony's social structure, and the unified blending of African religions and Christianity into the Vodou religion. It describes the beginning of the Haitian revolution in detail from August 21, 1791, with a coordinated slave revolt on the island's northern side and a free black revolt on the western side. Skimming past the complexities of the factions between the French revolutionaries and the French planter class, we shift to a common factor: competent leadership. As stated in the text regarding Toussaint Louverture, he “...quickly recognized for his military and political skills. By 1794, he had built up the best-organized and most effective military unit on the island. When he decided to join Sonthonax and the French republicans in May 1794, the military balance soon shifted in their favor” (Popkin). Later, Napoleon desired to restore French control and slavery over Saint-Domingue, which led Toussaint’s leading generals to go to the French side. He was later exiled and died in France in 1803. In contrast to Toussaint and his generals, most of the slave population resisted the French, as by the fall of 1802, it became abundantly clear that the French intended to bring back slavery. This led to fierce resistance: “But the French were losing large numbers of men in guerrilla fighting; even more were falling victim to yellow fever, which killed General Leclerc himself” (Popkin). This fierce resistance also resulted in the French committing many atrocities against the enslaved

population in the fighting between 1802 and 1803, which then resulted in the enslaved Black people killing many of the remaining whites in Saint Domingue. With the French cut off from reinforcements and supplies in May 1803 due to an outbreak of war with Britain, the French commander Rochambeau surrendered his forces and withdrew from the island. At the culmination of this text, the author noted that it took miraculous conditions for the Haitian Revolution to succeed: slaves outnumbered the whites by more than 10 to 1, and the white settlers were divided. They shifted the mixed-race population to the enslaved side, and Toussaint's support from foreign powers desiring to deliver a blow on the French.

Primary Source Analysis

I will assess two primary sources related to the Haitian Revolution in this primary source analysis. These sources will help solve the research question by diving into why the Haitian Revolution was successful, as noted in the accounts of a famous Haitian revolutionary and a British (Irish) Army officer. It is observed that the brutality of slavery in Saint-Domingue and the underestimation of the Haitian rebels potentially led to the slave revolt's success. The first primary source is written by Beaubrun Ardouin, a Haitian historian and politician, who wrote the eleven volume "Études Sur l'Histoire d'Haïti (Studies on the History of Haiti) for which this source is a part of between 1853 and 1860. Specifically, it is in volume six, and he writes about Haitian history through the context of other nationalist revolutions. As a brief background, Ardouin has Afro-European ancestry and was free before the onset of the Haitian Revolution. He taught himself about education and sought after French literature

through Voltaire and Montesquieu as influences. “*Dessalines, the Flag, and Independence*” by Beaubrun Ardouin begins with Cap Francais and Mole's capitulation, solidifying the defeat of the French presence in the 1802 expedition to Saint-Domingue. With Saint-Domingue secured, the Haitian military sought to control all of Hispaniola. However, it was delayed in preparation for clarifying the goals of the Haitian revolution to Haitian citizens, France, and the world. Jean-Jacques Dessalines decided the slogan “Liberty or Death!” should be inscribed on the native flag derived from the French flag but with a torn-off white color. Upon adopting this slogan, Dessalines signaled to the French that Saint-Domingue was now free of French domination and oppression, and it would be redundant for them to fight this grueling war only to be controlled by the French again. France had oppressed the Saint-Domingue population by “...acting against the rights acquired by the Black race, and which it had recognized, not to provoke that separation, which had become indispensable for the maintenance and preservation of those rights” (Beaubrun, 1853-1860). Furthermore, many Haitians believed the Haitian Revolution was more just and legitimate than the French Revolution because they had to fight to be put in chains. Moreover, due to the brutal effort and bloodshed during the revolution, the Haitian generals naturally represented the new Haitian nation, and it was solely up to them to determine its destiny. If they proceeded differently than establishing Haiti as a sovereign nation, they would be forced to ask for assistance from most of the remaining colonists, which they desperately did not want to do. This is because the French expedition under the command of Rochambeau and the crimes committed against the Haitian population, along with the reestablishing of slavery, led the Haitian generals to exclude all white men from their new society. In the first days of December 1803, Jean-Jacques Dessalines ordered the

return of the soldiers who captured Cap Francais, who marched triumphantly in front of the populace. He ordered the generals to meet him in the city of Gonaives, where they would write and sign the act of independence. The town was chosen due to its central position, extensive fortifications, and the fact that it was the first place Dessalines conquered against the French. An unknown author proclaimed the new state to be called Haiti, "...the name it had borne under its first inhabitants..." (Beaubrun, 1853-1860). to break away from the oppressive colonial past dominated by French and Spanish alike. Chareond, who served as a secretary in the general staff, sought inspiration for the act of independence from Thomas Jefferson: "...admiring the work of Jefferson, he sought to model the declaration of independence of the second people to free themselves from the European yoke after the earlier one" (Beaubrun, 1853-1860). However, since he lacked the passion, appropriate spirit, and terrible language to carry out the terrible reprisals against the French, Dessalines disapproved of his work and sought Boisrond Tonnerre. Understanding Dessalines' spirit of fury and vengeance, he charged inhuman language: "In order to draw up the act of our independence we need the skin of a white man to serve as parchment, his skull for inkwell, his blood as ink, and a bayonet as the quill" (Beaubrun, 1853-1860). Dessalines readily agreed with his ideas and gave him control over writing the Act of Independence. The reasoning behind these vengeful and violent ideas is due to the French army's crimes during the Haitian Revolution. Tonnerre then got to work and wrote the Act of Independence, which was read and approved by Dessalines and the other generals and officers, but they failed to preserve Chareron's work. An extraordinary crowd gathered at Gonaives' Place des Armes on January 1, 1804, where the troops and populace witnessed the cause of the Haitian Revolution read aloud in the acts of independence by Tonnerre. Tonnerre's acts

of independence cite against the brutality of the French regime: “It isn’t enough to have expelled from your country the barbarians who have bloodied it for two centuries. It isn’t enough to have put a brake on the ever reborn factions who took turns fooled by the phantom of liberty that France dangled before your eyes” (Beaubrun, 1853-1860).

Additionally, he calls for outright hatred and vengeance against the French due to the sheer cruelty of their crimes. However, he calls for peace and harmony with neighboring countries. The act then calls for absolute commitment to Haiti’s independence in front of France and the universe: “Let us swear before the entire universe, before posterity, to ourselves, to forever renounce France and to die rather than live under its domination. To fight to the last breath for our country’s independence!” (Beaubrun, 1853-1860).

Ending the passage is a rallying cry to maintain Haiti’s independence at all costs: “Take the vow to live free and independent and to prefer death to anyone who wants to place you again under the yoke. Finally, swear to forever pursue the traitors and the enemies of your independence” (Beaubrun, 1853-1860). Dessalines, his generals, the troops, and the Black population vowed to maintain Haiti’s independence and the renouncement of France with enthusiasm and the resolution to do so. Later, Boisrond Tonnerre read the act establishing Haiti’s independence that forever renounced France and would rather die than live under its domination again. Moreover, the following act established Jean-Jacques Dessalines as Governor General of Haiti for life, which granted him extensive rights such as the right to make peace and war and name his successor. Both previous acts were well received by the assembled troops and the gathered populace, as independence had been the intended goal of the Haitian Revolution against the French colonial authorities. While the title of Governor-General for Dessalines raised concerns about the concentration of power, they proved to be moot due to Dessalines’ character

and the current circumstances. His power was, however, conditional, as the generals pledged to obey the laws rather than his will. While the given circumstances prevented the feasibility of a republic or more democratic government, resistance to dictatorial tyranny can lead to the downfall of the Governor-General. Still, the acts establishing Dessalines' dictatorship and Haiti's independence were widely celebrated by the Black population, which reflects the unity and commitment to the independence of the Haitian people.

The following primary source covers the account of Marcus Rainsford, a British military officer who fought in the American Revolution. In 1799, he visited Saint-Domingue to recruit Black soldiers for the British, and he met with Toussaint Louverture. While he was not an abolitionist, he supported Haitian independence and argued that they posed no threat to British colonial interests, which was unusual for the time. Rainsford wrote "An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti: Comprehending a View of the Principal Transactions in the Revolution of Saint-Domingo; with its Ancient and Modern State" in 1805, which this source is a part of. Rainsford's account details the unsuccessful mobilization of colonial French resources to combat the Haitian Revolution. It begins with the midst of colonial unrest in Saint-Domingue, where there are political discussions without the involvement of the slave population. Without mentioning their plight and suffering, they contemplated that any disputes among their masters began with outrage and violence. Because of this observation, they began to follow those means that "...promised such certain success, and at the same time, afforded objects the most grateful to people in a state of slavery" (Rainsford, 1805). The slaves felt no pleasure in requisitioning power from the mulatto

people as they were more acquainted with their dispositions. On a calm day, disaster suddenly struck before daybreak as the revolt commenced in the town of Cape against the plantation managers, resulting in their murdering and burning of the plantations. The governor immediately mobilized his forces, but it was too late to prevent the widespread destruction of the revolt. In a plantation called Noe, the ringleaders of the revolt murdered the plantation managers, which was followed by the adjoining plantation and repeated the same iniquities. The slaves of the estate immediately linked up with the other plantation and determined to free themselves from their masters through bloodshed. Several plantation owners, despite past good treatment, were not spared from the wrath and were subsequently killed as well. The determination of the enslaved Haitians on their quest for liberation vastly overshadowed their loyalty to their past masters. It became evident that the revolt was coordinated throughout the province: "...the flames quickly burst from all quarters" (Rainsford, 1805). This terrorized the province's inhabitants, and horror spread throughout the land. The province's men armed themselves, and the governor took charge of the national guards from the assembly's measures. Before any plan, the white women, and children and the most loyal of the slaves boarded the ships in the harbor for safety. Able-bodied mulatto men enrolled in the militia for their protection in exchange for marching against the rebels. This fostered a sense of mutual trust and cooperation between the different racial groups. Efforts were made to mobilize both local inhabitants and seamen from docked ships to confront the rebels under the leadership of M. de Touzard, a veteran officer with experience of conflicts in North America. They faced the 4,000 rebels at the plantation of M. Latour, where, despite inflicting significant rebel casualties, they were forced to retreat due to the rapid reinforcement of rebel forces. The town's vulnerability forced

the governor to establish a defensive stance to fortify their position. If the rebels proceeded to cap Francois, they could have easily captured the town, inflicting numerous atrocities.

Many defense works were erected: "...a strong palisade and chevaux-de-frize, surrounded the town on the land side" (Rainsford, 1805). A shipping embargo prevented enemy access to the town while retaining the sailors in case of a retreat. The insurrection spread despite defensive measures and several rebel attacks on camps and settlements. The rebels attacked the towns of Grande Riviere and Dondon with fierce assaults, resulting in a significant slaughter of the defenders, with the remaining survivors of Dondon seeking refuge in Spanish territory. The rebels controlled vast swaths of territory: "The whole of the plain, of the Cape, and the district of Grande Riviere, now in the possession of the insurgents..." (Rainsford, 1805). The rebels committed unspeakable atrocities on their captured land, such as torture, rape, and murder, with savage brutality. The account concludes with a tragic irony of the rebels' actions as their exposure to suffering and degradation clouded their moral judgment to commit remorseless atrocities and led to their downfall.

Conclusion

To conclude, The Haitian Revolution is a rare example of a successful slave revolt that led to the establishing of an independent nation. Therefore, it can be inferred that The Haitian Revolution succeeded due to a unique combination of factors, including the brutal conditions of slavery in Saint Domingue, the unity of the enslaved people, and the influence of ideas of liberty and equality from the French Revolution. The Haitian rebels accomplished the impossible and successfully established a slavery-free nation despite the overwhelming odds against them. This remarkable achievement resulted from a historic slave revolt, which occurred only once throughout history. To the best of my ability, I attempted to properly cite the sources used in good faith for this research paper. Some of the years for the footnotes need to be included, and this is due to information missing from the publication date for several of the sources. Moreover, since most secondary sources are online, I needed help finding page numbers to cite them adequately.

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