



Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution

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The first and only successful slave revolution in the Americas began in 1791 when thousands of brutally exploited slaves rose up against their masters on Saint-Domingue, the most profitable colony in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Within a few years, the slave insurgents forced the French administrators of the colony to emancipate them, a decision ratified by revolutionary Paris in 1794. This victory was a stunning challenge to the order of master/slave relations throughout the Americas, including the southern United States, reinforcing the most fervent hopes of slaves and the worst fears of masters.

But, peace eluded Saint-Domingue as British and Spanish forces attacked the colony. A charismatic ex-slave named Toussaint Louverture came to France's aid, raising armies of others like himself and defeating the invaders. Ultimately Napoleon, fearing the enormous political power of Toussaint, sent a massive mission to crush him and subjugate the ex-slaves. After many battles, a decisive victory over the French secured the birth of Haiti and the permanent abolition of slavery from the land. The independence of Haiti reshaped the Atlantic world by leading to the French sale of Louisiana to the United States and the expansion of the Cuban sugar economy.

Laurent Dubois weaves the stories of slaves, free people of African descent, wealthy whites, and French administrators into an unforgettable tale of insurrection, war, heroism, and victory. He establishes the Haitian Revolution as a foundational moment in the history of democracy and human rights.

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From Reader Review *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* for online ebook

David Bates says

Laurent DuBois's *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* provides a careful synthesis detailing the causes, personalities and events of the Haitian Revolution. Unfolding his story, DuBois tells us that French Saint Domingue was the "most brilliant" of the colonies of the Caribbean, a jewel of the shrunken empire which remained to France after the peace of 1763. Its rich soil supported the most productive sugar cane plantations in the Americas, where European and mixed race creole masters numbering in the tens of thousands presided over a population of one hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand African slaves. The colony's economy had expanded rapidly in the early decades of the eighteenth century, fueled over the years by the labor of slightly less than a million captives from Africa, roughly ten percent of the entire African slave trade's volume. Many were brutally worked to death in the blazing hot cane fields, to be replaced by tens of thousands of new arrivals each year, and first generation Africans formed the majority of the unfree laborers. The proportionally massive slave class formed the base of the colony's racial order, supporting both the gens de couleur, free people of color whose ancestors were emancipated and bequeathed property by early generations of French colonists, and the more recent European French who hoped to make their fortunes quickly and return back across the sea before tropical disease claimed their lives.

As revolution unraveled the political and social order of France, racial tensions within Saint Domingue boiled over. Since it had become the focal point of colonial energy following 1763, increasing numbers of European French had come to the island, engaging in a political struggle to disenfranchise and disempower the gens de couleur through a series of laws prohibiting them from voting or working in law, medicine or finance, but employing them increasingly as police and militia soldiers. In 1791 hostilities between the Europeans and gens de couleur escalated to violence when the National Assembly failed to decisively intervene on either side. Slave revolts concurrently spread from the northern plantations to the western and southern sections of the colony, at times recruited and at times opposed by the gens de couleur in their struggle against the European French. Both the Spanish, operating from their colony of Santo Domingo on the eastern half of the island and the British, operating from Jamaica, launched invasions of Saint Domingue. Long frustrated by the imposition of mercantilist policies, and alienated by the rising power of the radical republicans in France, many of the European planters favored the British, while many African militias joined the Spanish. In a desperate bid to maintain control the French commissioners emancipated the slave population in return for loyalty to the Republic in the summer of 1793. The abolition of slavery throughout the French Empire followed the subsequent year.

In the spring of 1794 a former slave named Toussaint Louverture, who would become the most powerful force in Saint Domingue in subsequent years, changed his allegiance from the Spanish to the French. Welding together an effective fighting force of Europeans loyal to the Republic, gens de couleur and former slaves he defeated the British, conquered Santo Domingo and consolidated his political authority throughout most of the island. Naming himself governor for life, Louverture pursued a semi-independent foreign policy while nominally ruling in the name of the French Republic, forging trade agreements with the United States and surrounding colonies. As he attempted to resurrect the plantation economy the colony became a police state which bound "cultivators" to laboring in the fields once more. The planter class, many of whom had fled during the war years, returned and accommodated themselves to his rule, and Louverture reassured surrounding colonies by not seeking to export slave rebellion – even going so far as to betray a rebellion conspiracy in neighboring Jamaica to the British authorities.

In 1802 a temporary peace with the British ended the necessity of French cooperation with Louverture and Napoleon sent an expedition of eighty thousand soldiers to reassert European control of the government and military. After the defection of some of his lieutenants Louverture surrendered and was transferred to a prison in eastern France, where he died. Resistance to the French rapidly escalated as it became clear that Napoleon intended to reinstate slavery throughout the French Empire. Demoralized by the compromise of egalitarian ideals, harassed by guerilla warfare and decimated by tropical disease, the French expeditionary force crumbled. Untethered from allegiance to the French Republic the resistance gathered into a destructive war of independence largely fought along racial lines. In 1804, under the leadership of Louverture's former lieutenant Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a new Haitian Republic was established.

The triumphal tone of DuBois' work is facilitated by the temporal frame within which he bounds his study. Having defeated the French and declared a new Republic led and defended by former slaves, in a land filled with the unmarked graves of generations of victimized Africans, renamed Haiti in the language of the Tainö natives who had been the first eliminated by European expansion, the New World indeed appeared justly avenged. This is the story of Haiti we prefer. Dessalines' vengeance had not fully expressed itself however. Months after independence Dessalines, out of political calculation or malice, he ordered the exile or extermination of the remaining white inhabitants of the island, creating a more sinister and complicated legacy which would echo powerfully in the early American republic.

DuBois' portrait of Toussaint Louverture, around whom the second half of his work largely revolves, is perhaps oddly unfocused due to the desire of the author to preserve his theme while remaining critical toward his subject. DuBois does not attempt to disguise Louverture's conservative policy choices; failing to free the slaves of Santo Domingo after conquering the Spanish colony, betraying the Jamaican slave conspiracy, erecting a police state to enforce plantation labor, preparing to import more "cultivators" from Africa. He does however justify Louverture by assuring his reader of the purity of Louverture's intentions. When the great leader sacrifices principle, correctly or incorrectly, it is with the ultimate aim of maintaining a strong Saint Domingue able to preserve the emancipation of its freedmen. His assurances are presumably based on Toussaint's letters and writings, which he tells us are almost the sole literary evidence of events within Saint Domingue in the mid to late 1790s. DuBois only occasionally quotes from these letters however, leaving the purity of Louverture's intentions open to doubts which further wrinkle the clean lines of the triumphal narrative.

Ushan says

Hispaniola was the first island in the New World discovered by Columbus; Spanish settlers soon slaughtered all the indigenous inhabitants, who called the island Ayiti, and imported Africans to be their slaves instead. After Louis XIV of France won a war with Spain and her allies, Spain ceded the western half of the island to France. In the 18th century the half-island became the most profitable colony in the New World, called Saint-Domingue, producing as much sugar as Cuba, Jamaica and Brazil combined, and half the world's coffee. Formerly a luxury enjoyed by the upper classes, sugar became a commodity consumed by average Europeans; it gave enough junk calories for the workers of the satanic mills of the Industrial Revolution, who did not have to grow their own food. Harsh as slavery was in the United States, that in Saint-Domingue was worse; in the United States, a population of 700 thousand slaves and 60 thousand free blacks in 1790 grew to 4 million slaves and 1/2 million free blacks in 1860; in Saint-Domingue, a million slaves imported during the 18th century resulted in a population of half-million slaves in 1791, and 30 thousand free blacks (there were also 30 thousand whites in the colony). A minor character of Voltaire's Candide is a slave whose hand was cut off when his fingers got caught in the millstones squeezing sap from stalks of sugar cane; many slaves were not so lucky, and simply died of septic shock. This means that most of the half-million slaves in Saint-

Domingue were African-born; many were veterans of the civil wars of the Kingdom of Kongo who were captured, enslaved and sold to transatlantic slave traders. A slave rebellion was started in 1791 by a Voudou priest in a religious ceremony; this event was referred to by Pat Robertson this year, who said that the Haitians deserved the earthquake because they swore a pact with the Devil. The rebels soon controlled the northern third of the half-island. This forced the hand of the National Assembly in France, which first granted equal rights to the free blacks, and eventually abolished slavery. After Britain and Spain went to war with Republican France, they tried to annex the half-island; commanders of the slave rebellion agreed to fight for France if she abolished slavery. The most prominent of the commanders was François-Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture, a former slave who defeated the British and the Spanish; he abolished slavery but tried to keep the plantation economy running, manned by nominally free workers. After Napoleon put an end to the French Revolution, he appointed proponents of slavery to the Department of Colonies, and sent an invasion fleet to Saint-Domingue to re-establish slavery in the colony. Napoleon's soldiers captured Toussaint L'Ouverture, who died in a prison in the Jura mountains. However, the invasion force was weakened by both tropical disease and defections to the other side. Poles who enlisted to fight for Napoleon in the hope that he would restore their divided motherland had no desire to fight to re-enslave Caribbean blacks; I read somewhere about an ambassador of Communist Poland meeting with the descendants of his compatriots who joined the risen slaves. In 1804 another rebel commander, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, also a former slave, defeated the remainder of the French forces, declared the independence of the new nation of Haiti, massacred all the whites on the half-island except the Poles and a few other groups, and crowned himself emperor. The new nation was not recognized by the United States until the Civil War, when Radical Republicans in Congress did so; Frederick Douglass was the ambassador for a few years. The revolution induced Napoleon to sell Louisiana to the United States, since his plan for having Louisiana grow food for Saint-Domingue, which would specialize in sugar, wouldn't work anymore; however, Thomas Jefferson was averse to recognizing the nation of risen slaves, lest they prove an example to the slaves in his country. Although Haiti has been a nation of abject poverty and coups d'état ever since, many Latin Americans saw the Haitian Revolution as an example; in the 1960s an Afro-Trinidadian historian admiringly compared Fidel Castro to Toussaint L'Ouverture.

Roy White says

Not a pretty story, but a fascinating and important one.
<http://lippenheimer.wordpress.com/201...>

Ben says

Choice quote from this fantastic book:

“The impact of the Haitian Revolution was enormous. As a unique example of successful black revolution, it became a crucial part of the political, philosophical, and cultural current of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By creating a society in which all people, of all colors, were granted freedom and citizenship, the Haitian Revolution forever transformed the world. It was a central part of the destruction of slavery in the Americas, and therefore a crucial moment in the history of democracy, one that laid the foundation for the continuing struggles for human rights everywhere. In this sense we are all descendants of the Haitian Revolution, and responsible to these ancestors.”

Zachary Bennett says

This was a delightful read, and a great summary of a very complicated event. The hardest part of telling the narrative of the HR is walking a fine line from previous historiography: the racist white interpretation that ignored it, the interpretation that worshipped Toussaint Louverture, and the interpretations which emphasized the importance of actors from above/below.

I think part of the reason many people don't know about the Haitian Revolution is because the event is so complicated: there are multiple actors pushing for different things across spaces which are often connected, often not at all. The French Revolution was necessary first. Saint Domingue was France's most profitable colony, and its population was overwhelmingly enslaved. Creole blacks, the product of interracial relationships were an important and often powerful group in the colony, although they couldn't vote. They started pushing their rights especially after the Declaration of the Rights of Man in Paris. It is interesting how even the revolutionary leaders in France, loudly proclaiming their belief in equality, were unable to emancipate the slaves: plantation interests and others wouldn't have it: money talks. After the slaves revolted in 1791, even abolitionists turned their backs on Haiti largely, since the horror of slaves taking their freedom violently (as if there was another way) surprised them.

In August 1791, slaves rose up outside Le Cap in northern Saint Domingue, drinking pig's blood. It's not exactly clear what sparked this first event at that specific time and place, clear African roots there, but it's the initial revolt that precipitates years of bloodshed. What is most surprising about the conflict is that it's not clear cut: creole blacks and enslaved Africans don't easily ally with one another, some ally themselves with Spain in San Domingo, some remain loyal to France. The French appointed minister of the colony, Sonthonax, was an important figure. Based on developments in Haiti, he granted emancipation months before the French did. Slaves and their leaders may have had different motives, but they all didn't want to see a return to slavery. Toussaint is the best figure who embodies this. A former slave, he emerges in the late 1790s as the most powerful military leader on the island. He advocated a limited freedom where slaves signed contracts to work on plantations for a year or so--not so revolutionary. Toussaint did this to rebuild the plantation economy, since he thought that economic power would be the best guarantor of emancipation. He pushes Sonthonax out, and becomes basically a dictator, but is still loyal to France.

Really the moment this Revolution stops becoming complicated is when the French under Bonaparte invade in 1802. The French find the climate brutal, kills half their troops. The goal was to re-enslave the population, and they soon found that to be impossible: freed slaves were willing to return to a state of peonage with some protected rights, but not slavery. Toussaint had made some enemies as dictator, and his combined forces surrendered, although others (like Sans Souci) kept fighting...he died in a French prison. The French invasion was a despicable affair: thousands died in a stalemate that the French would never prevail in. Enough white people in the colony associated with the French that the Haitian Revolution became racial in a final way: black creoles and black slaves united against the remaining whites. It was around the initial invasion period that Haiti declared independence.

This book was great, and although I wish I learned more about the immediate post-revolution: type of government, etc. Dubois mentions how Haiti, to secure its independence and emancipation from France, had to compensate the French, payments lasted into the 20th century.

Katie says

A wonderfully-told history of a fascinating story. I especially enjoyed Dubois's chapter on the attempts, largely led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, to transition Saint-Domingue from a colony built on slavery to one built on a free labor. Lots of complexities and grey areas.

The Haitian Revolution covers so many key aspects of global history at this point in time. I feel like it ought to be more widely discussed and studied.

Daniel Polansky says

A solidly written history of a fascinating period of human history about which I knew relatively little and now want to learn more. There's nothing particularly striking about the style but it's a competent overview of a series of extraordinary events. Definitely made me want to pick up something more substantial on the subject.

Katrina says

As a fan of popular history: this book is readable and engaging.

As a historian: Dubois' use of sources is masterful and his prose is engaging. I'm using this in a course and it remains to be seen how students will respond. However, I LOVED this book!

Highly recommend.

John says

The Haitian Revolution is extremely complex, and I have never fully understood it. Why was Toussaint Louverture fighting with the Spanish for a while before flipping back to the French? What were the British doing there? Where did Dessalines come from, and how did he get to be in charge? Why did Napoleon seem to back Toussaint, only to turn on him and send an army to reimpose slavery in St. Domingue? I had heard bits and pieces from around the edges, which basically always simplify it into a big slave revolution, led by Toussaint, that was successful even though Toussaint was kidnapped by the French and died.

After reading this, I finally feel as though I get it. I know the story. It IS a very complicated story, and Dubois doesn't get distracted here with a lot of complicated argument. He basically just tells the story as clearly as he can. What sets "Avengers of the New World" apart (besides the title, which is a really great title) is that he doesn't try to explain the revolution exclusively through conditions in St. Domingue, or through the French Revolution, but rather shows how the whole Atlantic world essentially drove this story. Without understanding the French and what they were doing, the Spanish and what they were doing, what the British were trying to do, what the Americans were trying to do, AND the very complex social situation on the island with enslaved people, free people of color, white creoles, and white people fresh from France and what they were ALL trying to do - without all that, you can't really understand all the twists and turns the conflict took. And it was very twisty and turny. And you can't understand how the enslaved people of St.

Domingue pulled off the greatest slave revolution in the history of the world. Which is a really important and compelling story.

James Wethington says

Intriguing book over the Haitian Revolution. It serves as a reminder to me of how far individuals will go in order to gain their freedom, even if that includes dying for it, for over a decade. This book is intense and Dubois does not hold back on the description of atrocities occurring in Haiti during the revolution. Some may experience "information overload" but you will walk away with a different perspective about Haiti.

As a side note, the Haitian Revolution was the only slave insurrection to succeed in North America and "spread fear" throughout North America. White slave owners were afraid of their slaves hearing about the revolt, fearing similar destruction and demise would happen to them, just as the French.

Megan Weiss says

Read this for my weekly paper and it was actually fairly interesting and horrifically eye opening. This was such an important time in history and I'd never learned about it before and that's a tragedy. The Haitian Revolution was a major turning point in the historical record and in the fight for equal human rights and freedoms for those of all races and colors.

Imani ♥ ? says

For me, this book was a decent foray into the Haitian Revolution and its beginnings. I appreciated that it de-centered the role of Louverture and set the Revolution and subsequent emancipation within a larger historical context and framework. I was not a fan of the style of writing, however, and I'm not sure if it should be considered a definitive work.

Sheila says

By all rights, the slave revolt in Haiti, which defeated Napoleon's army, should be given greater moral and political status than the American Revolution. But, because of racism, this astounding history has been buried in a potter's field. "Avengers of the New World," with its many, many lessons for the masses who still struggle for freedom, is a must read. You simply cannot understand the French or American Revolutions without "following the money." The wealth that built Europe and the United States - and which fueled the thirst of the new bourgeoisies for "freedom," came from slavery, and Haiti was the most profitable slave colony in the world.

Author Dubois (who is related to CLR James, who wrote "The Black Jacobins," the famous history of the Haitian revolution) does not romanticize Toussaint Louverture, the African warriors, or free coloreds who together defeated the French. This is a bitter, inspiring story. Louverture was not socialistic, like the maroon societies formed in the hills or on pirate ships by escaped slaves, rebellious sailors and indentured

servants (read "The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic" by Peter Linebaugh). Louverture and subsequent leaders returned to the class-based plantation system to rebuild the economy and reestablish trade relations. That, and the punishing reparations Haiti was forced to pay France (for the losses of slave owners!) contributed to the impoverished Haiti that we see today.

Dusty says

This book achieves exactly what its subtitle says: It outlines the "True Story of the Haitian Revolution" with just enough information about France's colonization of Hispaniola as is absolutely needed to understand the events that transpired between 1791 and 1804 and only a few broad comments about the impact the slave revolt and eventual revolution would have on the international community for the duration of the nineteenth century. Dubois aims, apparently, to create a popular history of the revolution; but while I think the book's rather dense for a casual reader I do think he excels at bringing vividly to life key figures like the savvy but paradoxical Toussaint Louverture. There are times when the story reads a bit like *The Lord of the Rings* -- thousands of men and women dead in battles, retaliatory campaigns, and other acts of immense and paranoid violence, their names erased from history, their bodies merely tally-marks on the competing forces' ledgers -- but this isn't a comment so much on Dubois's book as on the nature of slavery and revolution. I haven't read another volume on the Haitian revolution, but I doubt you'll find a more compelling one than this.

Recommended.

Carl says

The only sucessful slave revolt in history has been kept a secret from most of us. Shortly after beginning the reading, I had my forehead slapping moment; it had never occurred to me that this revolution took place during the years that France, the colonial nation, was being torn apart by its own revolution. Several factions were matched against each other & frequently switched loyalties in this uprising, white plantation owners, free blacks, slaves, escaped slaves called maroons, soldiers & administrators sent from France, and finally military & administrative persons representing the efforts of Spain & England seeking to wrest control of the colony from France. Slaves were armed & used as pawns in the colonial struggles but ultimately turned the conflict in support of their won aims for freedom.
