

Haiti - a history of intervention, occupation and resistance



said the streets were safer than before the quake. An Irish doctor from *Médecins Sans Frontières* confirmed on radio that they were working in Cité Soleil were operating unguarded and unhampered inspite of the areas reputation. This idea of Haiti as riddled with (poor, black) terror gangs waiting to pounce on naive (white) visitors goes back to the rebellion and, in the context of the earthquake, is resulting in additional deaths, as has been made clear by a London Times' article titled '*Fear of the poor is hampering Haiti rescue.*'

Conquest, slavery and resistance

Foreign intervention goes back to the time before the Haitian revolution. Haiti is the western 1/3 of an island which Columbus came across on his first voyage to the Americas and claimed for Spain, ignoring the fact it was already populated by an estimated 4-500,000 Taino people. He called the island Hispaniola, the people who lived there called it Haiti - the name that was restored when the republic was declared. Columbus had heard there was a lot of gold on the island so he left 39 of his crew there who built a fort with Taino help called La Navidad, the crew were ordered to explore the island and gather gold. He recorded that "*I have ordered a tower and fortress to be constructed and, a large cellar, not because I believe there is any necessity on account of [the natives] ... I am certain the people I have with me could subjugate all this island ... as the population are naked and without arms and very cowardly.*" However, when he returned the following year on his second voyage he discovered the fortress destroyed with the corpses of his men on the beach as the Taino population had risen up against them in response to mistreatment, which included the kidnapping of Taino women.

His second voyage included 17 ships and 1200 settlers and with this force Columbus demanded that every Taino over the age of 14 deliver a hawk's bell full of gold every three months. If they failed to do so they had their hands cut off and were left to bleed to death. On or before 1511 a Taino Cacique (chief) called Hatuey left Hispaniola for Cuba with 400 others in canoes to warn the people that a Spanish expedition was under way to conquer them. Bartolomé de Las Casas the radical Spanish priest who had previously been a plantation owner in Hispaniola wrote that Hatuey showed them a basket of gold and jewels and told them "*Here is the God the Spaniards worship. For these they fight and kill; for these they persecute us and that is why we have to throw them into the sea... They tell us, these tyrants, that they adore a God of peace and equality, and yet they usurp our land and make us their slaves.*

They speak to us of an immortal soul and of their eternal rewards and punishments, and yet they rob our belongings, seduce our women, violate our daughters." Hatuey conducted a guerrilla war against the Spaniards before being captured and burned alive on February 2 1512. In 1522 another Taino Cacique led a revolt of as many as 3000 in the Bahoruco mountains on Hispaniola itself which forced a treaty from the Spaniards.

Within 30 years so many (up to 90%) of the Taino had been worked to death in the gold mines or died of starvation or disease that the Spanish started transporting enslaved Africans to replace them. This was the pattern across the Spanish-occupied Caribbean; according to Bartolomé de Las Casas "*it was a general rule among Spaniards to be cruel, not just cruel, but extraordinarily cruel so that harsh and bitter treatment would prevent Indians from daring to think of themselves as human beings. As they saw themselves each day perishing by the cruel and inhuman treatment of the Spaniards, crushed to the earth by the horses, cut in pieces by swords, eaten and torn by dogs, many buried alive and suffering all kinds of exquisite tortures.*" The Tainos however were never completely wiped out, a couple of hundred survivors set up free settlements with escaped Africans in the mountains. The first significant insurrection of enslaved African also occurred in 1522 when Wolof people on the sugar plantation of Columbus's son rose with many escaping to the mountains after the rebellion. These 'Maroon' communities

continued to resist the Spanish, by the 1530s Plantation owners had to travel in large armed groups. They referred to the communities as Cimarrones or 'wild animals', a striking similarity to *Time Magazine's* use of the term "*human rats*" for Haitians today.

The Spanish colony declined in particular after the conquest of the American mainland began, with many settlers leaving for the silver mines. Conditions of increased poverty resulted in a breakdown of the racial divisions and the population came to be mostly composed of people of mixed Taino, Spaniard and African descent. In 1605, Spain launched an attack on the settlements outside of Santo Domingo (now capital of the Dominican Republic), this is now known as the devastaciones because half the people died after been forced to move closer to the city where they could be controlled.

The division of the island took place in 1697 after France and Spain had fought an imperialist war over it. The French part was then called Saint-Domingue and had attracted 30,000 French settlers in a few decades due to the vast fortunes to be made from sugar, coffee, rum, cotton and indigo. It led the world in the production of these items and by three-fourths of the world's sugar was produced there. The enslaved Africans who worked the plantations lived and died under the brutal Code Noir; it's estimated that 1/3 died within the first couple of years of their transportation, in this period 29,000 Africans were being transported to Haiti every



year. One man who spent half his life in slavery later wrote of what he witnessed: "*Have they not hung up men with heads downward, drowned them in sacks, crucified them on planks, buried them alive, crushed them in mortars? Have they not forced them to eat excrement? And, having flayed them with the lash, have they not cast them alive to be devoured by worms, or onto ant hills, or lashed them to stakes in the swamp to be devoured by mosquitoes? Have they not thrown them into boiling cauldrons of cane syrup? Have they not put men and women inside barrels studded with spikes and rolled them down mountainsides into the abyss? Have they not consigned these miserable blacks to man-eating dogs until the latter, sated by human flesh, left the mangled victims to be finished off with bayonet and poniard?"*

Organised rebellion and the world's 3rd republic

The first sustained organised rebellion was in the 1750s, led by François Mackandal until he was captured and burned alive by the settlers in 1758. By 1789, there were around 40,000 white settlers and 500,000 enslaved Africans as well as a growing population of people of colour ('mulattoes' as they were then known) many of whose origins were in the rape of African women by white slave owners. Unlike the plantation system of the US such offspring were 'free' and, although discriminated against in many ways, could own land and even enslave black people themselves. There were some 26,000 free people of colour and a few were wealthy but even these few did not share the political rights of the white population. In the aftermath of the publication of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* during the French Revolution on 26 August 1789, one of them, Vincent Oge who had recently returned from revolutionary France, demanded the right to vote and, when this was refused, led a small rebellion. When captured, he was executed by being broken on the wheel; a method of execution where the victim is tied to a cart wheel, has their limbs smashed with hammers and is left to die. The roots of the violence that the people of Haiti suffer surely lie in the extreme brutality used to maintain slavery. Shortly after the execution of Oge, the French Revolutionary government granted citizenship to wealthy, free people of colour.

The large landowners who ran the island refused to implement this law. Rumours were also circulating that slavery was to be abolished by France, these were untrue but probably based on the activity of an abolitionist society in Paris and preparation began for a rising. The largest plantations were in the northern part of the island and it was there that the enslaved people rose on 22 August, taking the northern province over the next 10 days. By 1792 1/3 of the island was in the hands of these black republicans. France, for economic and then military reasons (the republic was at war with Britain and Spain), was forced to make concessions. By 1793, these concessions had built up to the French commander, Sonthonax, freeing all the enslaved people after negotiations with the black leaders of the rebellion which included Toussaint L'Ouverture. Sonthonax who was sent to Haiti with 7,000 troops in 1792 had been a member of the abolitionist French '*Society of the Friends of the Blacks*' which demanded that the ideas of the French revolution be extended to the colonies, Oge had also been a member of this society. In

return they then helped the French defeat the British and Spanish. In reality, the French were just giving legal recognition to the fact the people had already liberated themselves however Sonthonax also gave citizenship to all. This meant that Haitian delegates, some of whom had been enslaved, travelled to France for the 1794 National Assembly. The Assembly not only confirmed the abolition of slavery on Haiti, it extended the abolition to the entire French empire.

An invading British army was defeated and, in 1801, an army under Toussaint invaded Santo Domingo to aid with the abolition of slavery there. In 1802, Napoleon sent a huge army to the island to attempt to re-impose slavery but, after a brutal war, it too was defeated despite receiving US backing in the form of 750,000 dollars in military aid. The US, with its large slave economy, was not keen on the idea of a free republic created by enslaved people that could serve as an example to its own enslaved population. During that war the second French commander, Rochambeau, wrote to Napoleon saying France must "*declare the negroes slaves, and destroy at least 30,000 negroes and negresses*" in order to win. Under Rochambeau, the "*French burned alive, hanged, drowned, and tortured black prisoners, reviving such practices as burying blacks in piles of insects and boiling them in cauldrons of molasses.*" After one battle, 500 prisoners were buried alive.

As well as causing immense human suffering, Napoleon's bloody attempt to reconquer the island for French imperialism did enormous economic damage. 50,000 French soldiers died in the war, including 18 generals. Around 100 Polish troops fighting with the French changed sides to fight with the Haitians and, because of this, while the rest of the white population were slaughtered or driven out at the end of the war, Polish settlers were told they could stay and around 400 did so. Toussaint L'Ouverture never saw the declaration of independence in 1804, however. He was captured a few months into the war and sent to France where he died in prison. The resistance was led by Jean-Jacques Dessalines and François Capois. Toussaint's last words before dying in prison were "*In overthrowing me, you have cut down in Saint-Domingue only the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are numerous and deep.*"

The Haitian revolution began some seven years before the first great republican revolution in Ireland in 1798 and lasted through the Emmett rebellion of 1803 as well. CLR James writes that Napoleon recalled General Humbert from his Irish liberation expedition for his war against Haiti. Yet outside of Haiti, its existence is almost unknown. The self-liberation of hundreds of thousands of enslaved people is very much less known than the later and staggered abolition of slavery in Britain and France, an abolition that was driven in part by the rebellions of enslaved people elsewhere sparked off by the Haitian example. It is clear why, in the aftermath of the revolution, it was not in the interests of the slave holders elsewhere at the time to spread the news of the liberation of the people of Haiti by their own hands. In 1816 for instance, Bussa's rebellion engulfed Barbados. Inspired in part by news of Haiti, hundreds of enslaved people rose, a quarter of the sugar cane was burnt and almost 1000 enslaved people were either killed in the

battles or executed after the rebellion was defeated. Instead they continued to economically punish Haiti. The people of Haiti escaped slavery but they could not defeat the colonial system which has continued to punish them to this day.

Aftermath of the rebellion

As with many successful revolutions, victory was followed by reaction and civil war. Toussaint L'Ouverture had restored the plantation system, invited back the planters and forced the freed people to work on the plantations, this time for a wage. After independence General Dessalines continued this policy and declared himself Emperor but was assassinated by two of his advisors in 1806. They then partitioned Haiti with one of them, Pétion, establishing the 'Republic of Haiti' in the southern part, in which the estates were broken up and the land distributed. The northern part was under Christophe who continued something every like the old plantation system. Both parts were reunited in 1820 under Pétion's successor. The young Haitian republic of Pétion provided financial and military aid as well as soldiers to Simon Bolívar between 1815 and 1817 as he fought to liberate South America from Spanish rule on the condition he would free enslaved people there. And for twenty years from 1822 the entire island was briefly unified under Haitian rule that saw the abolition of slavery in the eastern two thirds. However in 1825 France sent an invasion fleet to the island. In order to prevent the invasion, the president had to agree to 'repay' France 150 million Francs for lost profits from the slave trade. The French abolitionist Victor Schoelcher wrote that "*Imposing an indemnity on the victorious slaves was equivalent to making them pay with money that which they had already paid with their blood.*" In return, France recognised Haitian independence while the US did not; even though Haiti was forced to borrow money from the US to pay the French, money that was still being repaid by Haiti as late as 1947.

Recognition by Britain and France did not end Haiti's woes or foreign interference. There have been 32 coups, most arising from conflicts within the ruling class and the various foreign business groups. Apart from these, Haiti was not to be recognised by the US until 1862. This recognition, which only came about as the US was abolishing slavery in a bloody civil war where the Union needed Haitian ports, had little real meaning, as military interference continued. In 1888, the US Marines sponsored a coup in the island and by 1913, US Warships had entered Haitian waters on 24 occasions. Then in 1914, in response to a peasant insurrection, the US Marines invaded the island and remained in occupation for over 20 years, during which time they killed, officially, over 3000 Haitians who resisted, including over 400 who were executed. Some Haitian historians have put the real death toll at 15,000. The US occupation imposed a new constitution which allowed foreign companies to own land. In a warning for what lies in wait for the survivors of the Haitian earthquake, the US State Department justified this as being in the interests of the Haitian people, reporting that "*It was obvious that if our occupation was to be beneficial to Haiti and further her progress it was necessary that foreign capital should come to Haiti...and Americans could hardly be expected to put their money into plantations and big*

agricultural enterprises in Haiti if they could not themselves own the land on which their money was to be spent." In reality, these changes saw peasant freeholders forced off the land to become labourers in the vast plantations that US corporations created as they bought up that land.

It was this invasion that Marine General Smedley Butler was referring to when he said "*I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in.*" It was Butler who had dissolved the National Assembly when it refused to ratify the US drafted constitution. Butler had also resurrected an old French law to force peasants to work as unpaid labourers building roads to enable the US military to rapidly move around on the island. During World War II peasants were expelled from more than 100,000 hectares to make room for rubber plantations producing for the US military and, although the US had withdrawn its military forces by 1934, it retained control of Haiti's foreign finances until 1947.

In his book *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*, Noam Chomsky quoted a New York business daily from 1926, which described conditions in Haiti as "*a marvellous opportunity for American investment*". "*The run-of-the-mill Haitian is handy, easily directed, and gives a hard day's labor for 20 cents, while in Panama the same day's work cost \$3.*" As plantation agriculture displaced peasants into urban slums, these advantages for US corporations grew so that the 13 companies active in 1966 had become 154 by 1981, accounting for 40% of Haiti's exports.

The Docs and the IMF

Haiti was also a victim of the Cold War anti-'communist' backlash, having to endure the bloodthirsty Duvalier dictatorship which ran from 1957 to 1986 first under François Duvalier (known as Papa Doc) and then under his son Jean-Claude or Baby Doc. François had come to power as a populist on the basis of a combination of black nationalism and voodoo, but his initial reforms were soon replaced by a personal dictatorship. Their rule was in part maintained through death squads, known as the Tonton Macoutes, who were kept loyal by being given land confiscated from peasants. It's estimated that over 30,000 Haitians were killed under this regime. Throughout this period the US continued military and economic aid as thousands of Haitians fled the country.

This foreign investment, counter to neoliberal orthodoxy, did not bring prosperity. In fact alongside IMF-ordered Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), poverty soared; by 1986, 60% of Haitians were earning less than 60 dollars a year. This was not helped by the USAID-World Bank development strategy begun in 1981 which had the goal of forcing the economy "*toward deeper market interdependence with the United States.*" This was achieved by shifting 30% of the arable land from food for local consumption to export cash crops. Twenty years ago Haiti produced enough rice to feed its own population, today 75% of the rice eaten is imported from the US making it the third largest importer of US rice in the world. Haitian rice production was wrecked