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The Haitian Declaration of Independence: Recognition, Freedom and Anti-French Sentiment

Julia Gaffield

The General in Chief

To the People of Hayti

Citizens

... [R]emember that you wish your remains to be interred near those of your fathers, when you have driven out tyranny; will you descend into their tombs without having avenged them? No, their bones would repulse yours.

And you precious men, intrepid Generals who, without concern for your own misfortunes, have rescued liberty by shedding your blood; know that you have done nothing, unless you give to the nations a terrible, but just, example of the vengeance that must be wrought by a proud nation after having recovered its liberty, and jealous of maintaining it; let us frighten all those who would dare to try to take it from us again: let us begin with the French Let them shudder when they approach our coasts, if not from the memory of the cruelties they perpetrated, then by the terrible resolution that we have entered into of putting to death, anyone who is born French, and who would soil with their sacrilegious foot the territory of liberty.

...

Let us walk in other footsteps, let us imitate those Nations who, carrying their solicitude to the future and not willing to leave an example of cowardice for posterity, prefer to be exterminated rather than lose their place on the list of free nations.

Let us ensure however that a missionary spirit does not convert us from our purpose; let our neighbors remain in peace, let them live quietly under the

laws that they have made for themselves, and let us not go, as revolutionary firebrands, erecting ourselves legislators of the Antilles, constituting our glory by disturbing the tranquility of the neighboring islands; they have not, like the one that we inhabit, been drenched with the innocent blood of their inhabitants; they have no vengeance to claim from the authority that protects them.

Fortunate to have never known the scourge that destroyed us; they can only wish for our welfare.

Peace to our Neighbors, but annihilation of the French name, eternal hatred to France: that is our cry.

...

Done at the General Quarters at Gonaïves.

the 1st January 1804

(Signed) J. J. Dessalines

Just over a month after the French army evacuated the colony of Saint-Domingue, General-in-Chief Jean-Jacques Dessalines gathered his leading generals and proclaimed the Haitian Declaration of Independence on 1 January 1804 at Gonaïves. With this proclamation, Dessalines concluded the event that we have come to know as the Haitian Revolution.

The Haitian Declaration of Independence marked the end of the world's only successful slave revolution and therefore represents a spectacular triumph over unimaginable adversity. The proclamation, however, did not articulate ideals of individual rights or provide for the foundations of a modern democratic republic. Instead, it paved the way for militarized authoritarian regimes whose main focus was the maintenance of national independence and sovereignty rather than the rights of the nation's citizens. The Haitian Declaration of Independence assured the abolition of slavery in the country but, at the same time, it undermined individual freedom in the name of national independence.

The proclamation was also a call to arms and initiated a nationwide massacre of white French citizens. Haitians leaders, however, were careful to specify that they directed their rage and revenge exclusively towards the French. The other empires and nations of the Atlantic World, Dessalines and later leaders argued, had nothing to fear from Haiti's independence; they desperately needed foreign allies and could not afford to alienate other slave-holding nations in the Atlantic. The document, therefore, is very much a product of the immediate context that confronted Haitian leaders as they sought to join the community of nations of the Atlantic World. Dessalines was well aware that while the Declaration

of Independence was a document that was officially addressed to the 'People of Hayti', it was also a public statement to the rest of the world. The Haitian government printed the document and distributed it to foreign officials, and newspapers around the Atlantic published excerpts of the text.

The Haitian Revolution had begun in August 1791 with a coordinated uprising by enslaved plantation labourers in the northern province of Saint-Domingue. The war quickly became an international affair and involved changing allegiances and battles between French, Spanish, British and rebel armies with enslaved soldiers, free people of colour and whites fighting for each. The rebellious armies succeeded in forcing the hand of the local French administrators and secured the abolition of slavery in the colony in 1793. The next year, the French National Convention ratified this decision and applied it to the entire French Empire. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Spanish and British forces had evacuated the island and the former slave (and slave-owner) Toussaint Louverture secured the top political position in the colony as the French-appointed governor general. Louverture issued a colonial constitution in 1801 that claimed near-autonomy for the colony but it maintained allegiance to the French Empire. In an effort to regain metropolitan control over the colony, Napoléon Bonaparte sent an expedition to Saint-Domingue to disarm the population and deport the leaders. It is also widely believed that Bonaparte instructed his brother-in-law General Victor Emmanuel Leclerc to reinstitute slavery in the colony; at the very least, rumours began to spread that this was the case.¹ It was at this point that the revolution became a war for independence.

The French generals leading Bonaparte's invasion in 1802 captured Louverture and sent him to prison in France. They then began to wage a war of extermination so that they could eliminate all of the 'brigands' in the colony and begin anew with more enslaved people purchased through the transatlantic slave trade. On account of this violence, Jeremy Popkin argues: 'If any group is to be held responsible for introducing the practice of racially motivated mass killing into Saint-Domingue, it is certainly the whites.'² The extreme war waged by the French encouraged the 'rebel' forces in the colony, now under the leadership of Dessalines, to respond in kind. The Haitian war for independence, therefore, was characterized by extreme violence on both sides. Eventually, Dessalines's army was able to capitalize on the disease that devastated the French army and by June of 1803 they had begun preparing for independence.

The Haitian Declaration of Independence of January 1804 announced to the people of Haiti and to the world that the island was no longer a French colony.

Unlike the United States' Declaration of Independence almost three decades earlier, the Haitian Declaration did not initiate a war of independence but rather brought one to an end. The document, however, like the American precedent, also sought to justify the colony's break from the metropole, but Dessalines emphasized the inherent differences between the French and the Haitians rather than their similarities. According to the Declaration, Haitians and Frenchmen were incompatible as citizens of the same country. At the core of this inherent difference was slavery: the French had 'drenched [the island] with the innocent blood of their Inhabitants'. Dessalines's proclamation inextricably linked national independence and the abolition of slavery; individual freedom was therefore subsumed within the authority of the state. Abolition of legal enslavement was the driving force behind the war for independence in Haiti, whereas in the United States 'freedom' referred to the metaphorical slavery of colonialism.³

When Dessalines and the leading generals declared independence, they were still reeling from recent events. 'Remember that you wish your remains to be interred near those of your fathers,' Dessalines cried, '... will you descend into their tombs without having avenged them? No, their bones would repulse yours.' Dessalines took the lead in initiating his version of the revenge that he claimed would satisfy their ancestors. Over the course of the first four months of 1804, Dessalines ordered his army to round up all of the white French citizens and kill them. A very small number of lives were spared. Foreign accounts of these killings suggested that they were the result of Dessalines's barbarism and a sign of the lasting dangers of slave rebellions and black power. To Haitians, however, the massacres symbolically signalled their newly secured freedom and independence by eliminating their former masters and colonial representatives. They also served practical purposes: the Haitian state would not have to fear continued challenges to their authority from within the island and the state could assume control of the land formerly owned by the white planters.⁴ Finally, the massacres provided a warning to all who dared to challenge the abolition of slavery on the island. They had given the world 'a terrible, but just, example of the vengeance that must be wrought by a proud nation after having recovered its liberty, and jealous of maintaining it'.

While the Declaration of Independence initiated acts of revenge for the crimes committed by the French during the colonial period and revolution, Dessalines also made clear that this one act would not end the war. The war must be forever: 'eternal hatred to France: that is our cry'. The French had, after all, not admitted defeat when their troops evacuated the colony in 1803. Furthermore, in the years that followed, French civilians, military leaders and

government officials engaged in a 'war of proclamations' in order to assert their sovereignty over their former colony.⁵ Dessalines well understood that Haitian independence would come under attack and the threat of reinvasion led to a concentration of authority in Haiti under military rule and limited the expansion of individual rights and political participation. The defence of national independence proved to be more important than individual freedom. In the Declaration of Independence, Dessalines predicted the continued threat from the former metropole and sought to warn the French of their destiny if they dared invade the island.

Ironically, by closing the borders to foreign attacks and creating a society dominated by military and security needs, the Haitian government tried to protect the free and independent society that they hoped to create. This protection, however, limited the scope of the universal freedom that the state espoused. By safeguarding its coasts, the Haitian state created an inextricable link between freedom and independence and the geo-political territory that the state occupied. While colonial Saint-Domingue and current-day Haiti only occupy the western third of the island of Hispaniola, Haitian leaders after the revolution claimed that Haiti occupied the entire island. The Spanish had ceded the eastern side of the island to France in 1795 under the Treaty of Basel; when Dessalines and his generals declared the colony independent from France, therefore, the colony occupied the entire island. In practice, however, Haitian jurisdiction was confined to the western side of the island until 1822 when Haitian President Jean-Pierre Boyer invaded the eastern side.

Haitian leaders all presented their cause as a universal one, but their efforts in state formation and freedom took place in a constrained and circumscribed geo-political space – one surrounded by empires committed to the maintenance of slavery.⁶ The borders of the island, at least in rhetoric, represented the boundary between universal freedom and the pervasive slavery and colonialism in the rest of the Caribbean in the early nineteenth century. The rigid boundaries that Dessalines initiated between Haiti and the surrounding world, however, were open to non-white 'natives' of the island. Dessalines published newspaper advertisements in the United States and other French colonies encouraging non-white 'natives of Hayti' to return to the island.⁷

In order to assuage the fears of the governments and slave-owners in neighbouring islands and territories, the flow of non-white migration, the Declaration of Independence promised, would only be one way. 'Let our neighbours remain in peace, let them live quietly under the laws that they have made for themselves, and let us not go, as revolutionary firebrands, erecting

ourselves legislators of the Antilles.’ Dessalines and later leaders understood that if they exported the revolution, they might then face a coordinated attack from all of the European empires and the United States who had a vested interest in preserving their systems of slave labour. As Dessalines’s efforts to increase the population suggest, Haiti’s leaders were willing and keen to expand the scope of universal freedom by inviting non-whites to join the nation, but they were not willing to jeopardize their achievements by invading foreign lands.

Dessalines’s counsel to Haitians not to disrupt the existing systems of neighbouring islands was also a direct promise to the governors of the surrounding islands and their superiors in Europe not to do so. By promising not to become ‘legislators of the Antilles’, Dessalines hoped to avoid wars with other countries that might usurp Haiti’s independence and re-enslave the population. It was also a demonstration that the Haitian government was willing to participate in the established customary practices of the law of nations. Haitians would respect the jurisdictional boundaries of the Atlantic. In communicating with the nations and empires of the north Atlantic, therefore, Dessalines hoped to become, what Eliga Gould calls, a ‘treaty-worthy nation’, in order to join the community of European empires and the United States of America.⁸

In addition to articulating promises to foreign nations regarding the containment of the revolution, Dessalines also sought acceptance as a sovereign and independent country. In issuing a declaration of independence, Haitian leaders followed the precedent set by the United States. The rallying cry of the war for independence had been ‘liberty or death’, words written in bold letters across the top of the Declaration of Independence, and this motto, Dessalines argued, also applied to Haiti’s participation in the community of nations of the (north) Atlantic. Let us ‘prefer to be exterminated’, Dessalines proclaimed, ‘rather than lose [our] place on the list of free nations’. As was the case with the United States almost three decades earlier, Haitians had to participate according to the terms laid out by foreign governments. By issuing a declaration of independence, Haiti, like the United States, ‘sought confirmation of their standing alongside other such states by justifying their secession and, in some cases, their recombination with other territories and peoples.’⁹ Haiti needed foreign governments to accept and recognize its independence and sovereignty. The creation of a defined and limited state meant that Haitian leaders acknowledged the limits of their powers and declared their willingness to participate in the community of nations in the Atlantic World.

Dessalines remained in power in Haiti, first as governor general for life and then as Emperor Jacques I, for two and a half years. On 17 October 1806, rebels

assassinated Dessalines. Following his death, a power struggle ensued between Henry Christophe and Alexandre Pétion. The country soon divided in civil war with Christophe ruling the northern department and Pétion the southern and western departments; both leaders, however, claimed to be the legitimate ruler of the entire country. This civil war lasted until 1820 when Pétion's successor Jean-Pierre Boyer reunited the country. Christophe and Pétion reiterated many of the central themes of nation-building and international diplomacy that Dessalines articulated in the Declaration of Independence.

All of the early Haitian leaders publicly assured foreign leaders and citizens that they would not export their revolution in order to secure universal freedom throughout the Caribbean. The continued emphasis on geography and the borders of the island highlights the symbolic and political importance of the physical space that Haitians had claimed as their own. These promises, however, did not mean that they did not try to increase the country's population as Dessalines had done. Twelve years after the Haitian Declaration of Independence, President Alexandre Pétion initiated the most extensive effort to recruit foreigners to join the Haitian nation. 'Haiti, argued Pétion, was a land where no one could be enslaved,' Ada Ferrer highlights, 'and where arrival in and of itself conferred freedom and eventually citizenship'.¹⁰ Pétion's 1816 constitutional revision included an article that would give all people of African and indigenous descent freedom and a path to citizenship if they made it onto Haitian soil. Pétion, however, like other Haitian leaders, promised that he would not export the revolution; but, by extending freedom and citizenship to non-whites in the Atlantic World, he was able to apply the universal freedom of the Haitian state to more people. In initiating these policies, Pétion, like Dessalines, hoped to increase Haiti's population, since it had been severely diminished by the thirteen-year Haitian Revolution.

While Haitian leaders attempted to participate in an international Atlantic community on the terms set by foreigners, the Haitian Declaration of Independence also created a unique Haitian state and nationality. 'Dessalines's Proclamation of Independence,' Doris Garraway argues, 'indexes some positive criteria for Haitianness, notably in its frequent references to Haitians as "indigenes" and its figuration of liberation from slavery as a moment of collective rebirth within the "empire of freedom"'.¹¹ Dessalines addressed his Haitian audience as 'natives,' despite the fact that over half of the enslaved population at the time of the revolution was African born. Furthermore, the Declaration named the country 'Hayti,' meaning 'mountainous' in Taíno, the name previously used for the island before the arrival of Christopher Columbus

in 1492. Haitians, Dessalines declared on 1 January 1804, were the rightful and legitimate inhabitants of the island. On the whole, however, Garraway concludes that in the Declaration of Independence Dessalines defined Haitian national identity via the exclusion of the French and the ongoing war against their former metropole.¹²

The Haitian Declaration of Independence had two central objectives: first, Dessalines proclaimed perpetual war against the French and initiated a nationwide massacre of the white French citizens who remained in the territory, and second, he tried to convince foreign governments that they should include Haiti in the community of recognized nations in the Atlantic World by promising not to interfere in their affairs. Both goals would contribute to the unification of the diverse population that had just become Haitian citizens and these citizens would never again see the yoke of slavery. Leaders in Haiti, however, struggled for decades to secure diplomatic recognition from foreign governments. France only recognized Haitian independence in 1825 in exchange for a large indemnity payment – to compensate the former plantation owners for their loss of property, including enslaved people – and favourable trade duties. During the period of diplomatic non-recognition, however, Haiti maintained its independence and sovereignty, and slavery never returned to its shores. January first is still celebrated as the day that Haiti won its independence from France.

Further Reading

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