A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution
Viewpoints/Puntos de Vista: Themes and Interpretations in Latin American History

Series editor: Jürgen Buchenau

The books in this series will introduce students to the most significant themes and topics in Latin American history. They represent a novel approach to designing supplementary texts for this growing market. Intended as supplementary textbooks, the books will also discuss the ways in which historians have interpreted these themes and topics, thus demonstrating to students that our understanding of our past is constantly changing, through the emergence of new sources, methodologies, and historical theories. Unlike monographs, the books in this series will be broad in scope and written in a style accessible to undergraduates.

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Each book in the “Viewpoints/Puntos de Vista” series introduces students to a significant theme or topic in Latin American history. In an age in which student and faculty interest in the global South increasingly challenges the old focus on the history of Europe and North America, Latin American history has assumed an increasingly prominent position in undergraduate curricula.

Some of these books discuss the ways in which historians have interpreted these themes and topics, thus demonstrating that our understanding of our past is constantly changing, through the emergence of new sources, methodologies, and historical theories. Others offer an introduction to a particular theme by means of a case study or biography in a manner easily understood by the contemporary, non-specialist reader. Yet others give an overview of a major theme that might serve as the foundation of an upper-level course.

What is common to all of these books is their goal of historical synthesis. They draw on the insights of generations of scholarship on the most enduring and fascinating issues in Latin American history, and through the use of primary sources as appropriate. Each book is written by a specialist in Latin American history who is concerned with undergraduate teaching, yet has also made his or her mark as a first-rate scholar.

The books in this series can be used in a variety of ways, recognizing the differences in teaching conditions at small liberal arts colleges, large public universities, and research-oriented institutions with doctoral programs. Faculty have particular needs depending on whether they teach large lectures with discussion sections, small lecture or discussion-oriented classes, or large lectures with no discussion sections, and whether they teach on a semester or trimester system. The format adopted for this series fits all of these different parameters.
In this fifth volume in the series, Professor Jeremy Popkin provides an interpretation of the Haitian Revolution of 1791, at once a massive slave revolt and the second successful independence movement in the New World. The volume provides a clear and concise introduction to a historical process that, by raising the twin specters of freedom and violence, reverberated through the Atlantic world. Popkin discusses the legacy of the Haitian Revolution in global terms: the movement profoundly shaped other independence movements in Latin America and the Caribbean, and affected the political discourse in early nineteenth-century Europe. A singular strength of this book is its chronological scope, encompassing the nineteenth century and beyond. The author makes the case that the Haitian Revolution was a process of global historical significance, and that it deserves equal billing with the much more widely studied revolutions in France and British North America.

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Map 1  Saint-Domingue/Haiti and the Caribbean.

Introduction

On 16 August 1791, a building was set on fire on one of the hundreds of sugar plantations in France’s wealthy Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue, today’s independent Republic of Haiti. The local white colonists immediately suspected one of the plantation’s black slaves. Under interrogation, he made a startling confession. “The most trusted slaves on the neighboring plantations and those in the adjacent districts had formed a plot to set fire to the plantations and to murder all the whites,” he claimed. The authorities in the nearby city of Cap Français, the largest city in the colony, dismissed the idea that uneducated black slaves could have conceived such a scheme. For years, a small minority of whites had successfully exploited the labor of a far larger population of slaves; the whites could not imagine that the blacks they had treated with such contempt for so long were capable of organizing themselves to overthrow their oppressors. Less than a week later, on the night of 22–23 August 1791, the whites learned how wrong they were. Just as the slave arrested for arson had said, bands of blacks attacked plantations in Saint-Domingue’s richest sugar-growing area, setting fire to the crops and killing or driving out the white owners and overseers. It was the start of a movement that would culminate almost thirteen years later, on 1 January 1804, when a general who had once been a slave, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, proclaimed the independence of the Republic of Haiti.

The Haitian Struggle for Freedom

The success of the thirteen-year-long insurrection in the French half of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, where Christopher Columbus had
landed in 1492 and begun the era of European colonialism, showed that
the movement for self-rule in the New World would not remain confined
to the British empire; the victory of the Haitians would help inspire
independence movements throughout Central and South America. The
Haitians’ triumph also showed that the movement for freedom in
America, begun by the white population of the British colonies in North
America in 1776, had leaped across the boundary of race. For the first
time, a population of African origin overthrew its white rulers. The main
leader of the Haitian movement, Toussaint Louverture, proved that a
former slave could command armies and govern as effectively as any
white man. Most importantly for the future of the Americas and the
entire Atlantic world, the Haitian Revolution struck a blow against
the institutions of slavery and racial hierarchy. The constitution of the United
States, drawn up in 1787, spoke of freedom, but left hundreds of thou-
sands of blacks in servitude; even free black people were denied the full
rights of citizens. In contrast, the Haitian constitution of 1805 pro-
claimed that “slavery is abolished forever” and that “all distinctions of
color among members of the same family must necessarily stop.” The
Haitian Revolution’s stand against slavery and racial discrimination
made it the most radical of the American revolutionary insurrections
against European rule. No study of the revolutionary era that laid the
basis for the modern world can afford to ignore this movement.

Present-day Haiti is a small spot on the map of the Americas: it occu-
pies less than half of the island of Hispaniola that it shares with the
Spanish-speaking Dominican Republic. Particularly since the devastat-
ing earthquake of 12 January 2010 that killed more than 130,000 people
and reduced its capital city of Port-au-Prince to rubble, media images of
Haiti emphasize the country’s poverty, environmental problems, and
endemic political turmoil. Two hundred years ago, however, the territory
that is now Haiti played a central role in world affairs. Ceded to France
by Spain in 1697, Saint-Domingue had grown in less than a century to
become the most profitable of all New World colonial settlements. In
1789, when the slave population in the thirteen United States was only
700,000, Saint-Domingue had nearly 500,000 slaves and produced almost
half of the entire world’s supply of sugar and coffee, as well as valuable
crops of cotton and indigo. At the moment when the Haitian Revolution
began, Saint-Domingue was the biggest market for African slaves, some
30,000 of whom were imported every year to keep its economy going,
and the wealth of the colony’s plantation-owners eclipsed that of even
the richest Virginia and South Carolina planters. Vital to the prosperity of France, western Europe’s largest country, Saint-Domingue was also a crucial trading partner for the United States: Yankee ships brought flour and salt meat and fish to feed the island’s population, and took home molasses to supply New England’s rum distilleries. The progress of the Haitian uprising was followed with passion and anxiety throughout the Atlantic world.

At the moment when the Haitian Revolution began in August 1791, the world’s attention was focused on the revolutionary upheaval in France itself. Two years earlier, after the storming of the Bastille in Paris on 14 July 1789, the legislators of France’s revolutionary National Assembly had issued their famous Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, proclaiming that “men are born and remain free and equal in rights.” The uprising in Saint-Domingue forced them to consider whether their principles applied to the 800,000 slaves in France’s overseas colonies. Torn between their assertion that freedom was a universal human right and their equally strong belief that France needed overseas possessions to maintain its own power and prosperity, the French revolutionaries wrestled painfully with the problem of reconciling their principles with their country’s national interest. In 1799 a successful general, Napoleon Bonaparte, seized power in France. In his mind, the liberty the French revolutionaries had proclaimed had proved to be incompatible with political stability and social order. He had even less sympathy for the attempt to build a free multi-racial society in France’s Caribbean colonies. His attempt to reimpose white rule in Saint-Domingue in 1802–3 provoked the most violent phase of the entire Haitian Revolution. The defeat inflicted on his forces by the island’s population foreshadowed the disasters in Spain and Russia that would bring about his downfall in 1814.

Like revolutionary France, many other parts of the Atlantic world were powerfully affected by the events of the Haitian Revolution. In addition to its importance for American commerce, the fate of slavery in Saint-Domingue was a major concern for slaveowners in the southern states. The flight of white colonists from the island produced the first refugee crisis in the history of the United States, and the support given to the black leader Toussaint Louverture in the late 1790s was the first example of United States intervention beyond its own borders. Napoleon’s defeat in 1803 led France to offer to sell its territorial claims in North America to the young American republic. This “Louisiana Purchase” opened the way for the westward expansion of the United States and its growth into a continental power. Former residents of Saint-Domingue
made up much of the early population of New Orleans and profoundly influenced that region’s distinctive culture. Blacks in the United States saw in the success of the Haitian movement proof that members of their race could achieve freedom; the Haitian example inspired some of the slave conspiracies of the early nineteenth century and gave courage to those who campaigned for the rights of their people through legal means.

The Haitian Revolution affected the entire western hemisphere, not just the United States. Whether it was an inspiration for the uprisings that led to the independence of other Latin American countries in the early nineteenth century remains a matter of debate, however. Throughout the region, ruling elites feared the spread of ideas about freedom among their slaves and dreaded the kind of violence that had characterized the Haitian movement. In South and Central America, independence movements in the 1810s and 1820s more closely resembled the movement of the free men of color that developed alongside the slave uprising during the Haitian Revolution, rather than the slaves’ own uprising, and independence did not immediately bring the end of slavery in many of those countries when they first gained their freedom. The Caribbean islands closest to Haiti proved the most resistant to the Haitian example; slavery was finally abolished in them by their colonial rulers, not through insurrection, and independence came even later. Even today, not all of them are independent: the United States governs Puerto Rico, and the islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe are overseas territories of France. In some Latin American countries the Haitian Revolution clearly promoted the growth of slavery rather than hastening its disappearance. Saint-Domingue refugees brought their highly efficient sugar-growing methods to Cuba and Brazil, creating new centers of production that would make those two countries the last places in the Americas to abolish the institution.

In Europe, intellectuals such as the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel pondered the implications of resistance to slavery, and British abolitionists, many of them motivated by religious principles, cited the Haitian movement as proof of the need to abolish slavery; in 1807 their efforts led the British Parliament to officially prohibit the slave trade. In Africa, the sudden disappearance of what had been the largest single market for new slaves profoundly affected the destinies of thousands of men and women who would otherwise have been shipped to the Caribbean. Taught a harsh lesson by the success of the Haitian Revolution, British and French governments and economic interest groups began to think that it might be more profitable to establish colonies in Africa itself, where black labor could be regimented to
produce for the European market without the moral stigma associated with the Atlantic slave trade. The Haitian Revolution was thus directly linked to the beginnings of a new age of European imperialism that would, by the end of the nineteenth century, affect almost the entire continent of Africa and many other parts of the world.

**Defining the Haitian Revolution**

The term “Haitian Revolution” is a relatively recent way of labeling the dramatic events of the years from 1791 to 1804. Historians who use this phrase argue that these events should be put on the same level as the American and French revolutions in discussions of the origins of modern ideas of freedom and equality. The phrase “Haitian Revolution” also suggests, however, that there was a unity to the events from 1791 to 1804 and that their final outcome reflected the accomplishment of a program consciously laid out from the beginning. As we will see, these propositions are not necessarily accurate. The slave uprising that began in 1791 affected only one of the colony’s three provinces, for example, and it developed alongside another revolutionary movement, the uprising of Saint-Domingue’s free people of color, that had very different goals. These two revolutionary movements were often in conflict with one another, a conflict that continued even after the declaration of Haitian independence in 1804. Initially, both of them fought against the French colonial government. From 1794 to 1801, however, both movements claimed to be supporting the French, until Napoleon’s intervention in 1802 drove most of the population to turn against them. Waged by a largely illiterate population, the Haitian revolt against slavery never issued a manifesto defining its goals, and its history has to be written almost entirely on the basis of evidence provided by outsiders, most of whom were thoroughly hostile to it. Those events certainly had revolutionary consequences, but trying to force them into a mold derived from American and French models is misleading. Including the Haitian Revolution as one of the modern world’s major revolutions requires us to rethink the very nature of such phenomena, and to recognize, for instance, that a revolution can develop without the appearance of a revolutionary party or movement.

Just as it is misleading to describe the Haitian Revolution as a unified movement with clearly defined and consistent goals, it is difficult to
describe its principal leader, Toussaint Louverture, as a revolutionary leader in the mold of Robespierre or Fidel Castro. To this day, it remains unclear whether Toussaint actually played any role in starting the slave insurrection in 1791. When he joined the movement, he did not initially call for the complete abolition of slavery, and he even rejected the first French decree of emancipation in 1793. After he switched from fighting against the French to fighting on their side in 1794, Toussaint consistently insisted that he was loyal to the French government, even when his actions appeared to undermine its authority. The laws he imposed on the population of Saint-Domingue during these years, however, were quite conservative and drove many blacks to revolt against him. Toussaint Louverture’s demonstration that a black man could govern a key territory in the Atlantic world had revolutionary implications, but he cannot be seen as a self-conscious, ideologically driven revolutionary in the mold of Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, or the leaders of the French Jacobins.

It has been customary to see the Haitian declaration of independence of 1804 and the promulgation of the first Haitian constitution of 1805 as marking the end of the Haitian Revolution. Slavery, the fundamental institution of colonial society, had been abolished and, with the defeat of the French army and the massacre of the remaining white colonists, the pre-revolutionary ruling class was completely replaced by a new group of rulers. Nevertheless, the outcome of the Haitian Revolution did not become clear until many years after 1804. By the end of 1806, Haiti had split into two rival states that continued to fight each other until 1820. France did not recognize Haiti’s independence until 1825, and it took several decades before the lasting features of post-revolutionary Haitian society became evident. The final chapter of this book outlines the major developments of Haitian history until the crisis of 1843, which may be seen as the last direct confrontation between the democratic and elitist currents coming out of the revolutionary period.

Studying the Haitian Revolution

Although people at the time were intensely aware of the importance of the events we now call the Haitian Revolution, outside of Haiti itself that movement has never commanded the same attention as the American
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and French revolutions of the same period. Whereas the United States rapidly expanded into a continental power, and whereas France remained a major factor in European affairs and ruled over a world empire well into the twentieth century, the small nation of Haiti did not have the same assets. As the only black-dominated country in the Americas, the new nation was treated with hostility by an outside world increasingly under the sway of racial prejudices that have still not entirely disappeared. Lacking natural and cultural resources such as the vast farming regions and the educational institutions the United States inherited from its colonial past, Haiti was unable to follow the same path to prosperity as its northern neighbor. The two American republics born in the revolutionary era were both racked by civil conflicts in the nineteenth century, but the United States emerged from its Civil War of 1861–5 with its democratic institutions and its economy largely intact, whereas Haiti suffered a succession of coups, dictatorships, and foreign interventions that obstructed the development of a strong civil society, stable political institutions, and a diversified economy.

Even before the January 2010 earthquake that focused the world’s attention on the country, interest in Haiti and its history was on the rise. As people in the United States and Europe have tried to grapple with the ambiguous legacies of their own histories, so strongly bound up with imperialism, racism, and the memory of slavery, and as our civilization has become truly global, with non-western countries playing an ever more important role in world affairs, the attention paid to the only successful uprising against slavery in history and the first successful non-white movement for national independence has grown rapidly. The catastrophe of 12 January 2010 has once again focused the world’s attention on Haiti, raising painful questions about the world community’s responsibility to help those in need and about Haiti’s own ability to implement the promises of freedom and equality of the revolutionary era. In the United States and Canada, the development of an important community of Haitian immigrants is drawing new attention to the history of the country that has produced such figures as the novelist Edwidge Danticat and the popular musician Wyclef Jean. Even for those with no personal connection to Haiti, like the American novelist Madison Smartt Bell, whose trilogy of dramatic novels about the Haitian Revolution, *All Souls’ Rising* (1995), *Master of the Crossroads* (2000), and *The Stone That the Builder Refused* (2004), was one of my own introductions to this history, the importance of the events of 1791 to 1804 is easy to understand.
Reconstructing the history of the Haitian Revolution is a complicated challenge. Participants in the American and French revolutions belonged to civilizations familiar with the written word; they left behind voluminous records from which historians can reconstruct their ideas and actions. The vast majority of the blacks who participated in the Haitian uprising were illiterate; the documents from which we have to piece together what happened between 1791 and 1804 come almost exclusively from whites, most of whom were hostile to the movement. The documents that we do have – French official records, letters from white colonists, newspaper articles published in the United States, memoirs by survivors of the revolutionary period – tell us much about the events of the period, but there are many questions about the Haitian Revolution that historians will never be able to fully answer. What did the ordinary members of the black population think they were fighting for? How did they view Toussaint Louverture and the other leaders of the movement, who did, in some cases, leave letters and other documents behind? What was the role of the slaves’ *vodou* religious beliefs in shaping the insurrection? What influence did the free population of color exert over the insurgents? Historians disagree on the responses to these and many other questions about the events leading up to Haitian independence; the best we can do is propose answers based on the fragmentary and often one-sided evidence we do possess, knowing that some essential aspects of the past will always escape us.

For Haitians themselves, the story of their ancestors’ struggle for freedom has great symbolic importance, and its heroes remain sources of inspiration to a population facing what often seem like insurmountable challenges. This account, constrained by the guidelines of modern historical research, may strike some readers as less vivid than the colorful scenes of revolutionary events painted by many of Haiti’s talented contemporary artists. Reconciling the living historical memory of the Haitian Revolution with the results of modern historical research is not a simple task. Nevertheless, the historian’s attempt to understand the events of the revolutionary period as the outcome of the actions of the men and women who participated in them has its own value, even if the historical record is not complete enough to answer all our questions. The aim of this book is, then, to provide students and general readers with a concise overview of the generally accepted historical facts about the Haitian Revolution, drawing on the scholarship of historians from Haiti itself as well as the research of those in the United States and Europe who have contributed to the subject.
For much of the period from the declaration of Haitian independence in 1804 until the last decades of the twentieth century, serious historical scholarship on this subject by scholars outside Haiti remained quite limited. Haitian historians have produced many important works on the subject, despite the fact that most of the surviving documents about the revolution are only available in France and not in Haiti itself, but their books, usually published in French, are often hard to find except in major research libraries. Outside of Haiti, few historians were attracted to a subject that inevitably raised troubling questions about the policies of the French Revolution and the national hero Napoleon, and reminded Americans that the United States had refused to recognize Haiti’s freedom for six decades. In recent decades, what the Haitian American scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot eloquently denounced in a famous essay as the “silencing” imposed on the Haitian Revolution for so long has begun to end. In writing this short history, I have been able to draw on a rapidly growing body of modern scholarship from both sides of the Atlantic; the recommendations for further reading at the end of this book will point readers to many of the sources I have used. If this book encourages readers to explore the subject further on their own, it will have achieved its purpose.