
H-France Review Vol. 8 (October 2008), No. 130

Jeremy D. Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007. xvi + 400 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$19.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-226-67583-1.

Review by William S. Cormack, University of Guelph.

Once considered an episode of secondary importance, historians of the Atlantic world now see the Haitian Revolution as crucial to the history of the entire revolutionary era. Revolution in Saint Domingue, France's richest colony, had a major economic impact in Europe. The colony also became an important theater of international war. The principal reason that there has been so much recent scholarship on Saint Domingue, however, is the racial dimension to the colonial struggles. In August 1791 the black slaves of Saint Domingue's northern plain rose in a massive revolt against white rule. This insurrection provoked metropolitan French legislators to grant equal rights to free men of color in the colonies in April 1792, and then to take the even more radical step of abolishing slavery throughout the French empire in February 1794. Between 1798 and 1802, black general Toussaint Louverture ruled Saint Domingue in the name of the French Republic. In January 1804 Jean-Jacques Dessalines, having defeated the Napoleonic forces sent to restore slavery, proclaimed the independent republic of Haiti. As Jeremy D. Popkin states in the introduction to this excellent new book, "Unlike the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789, the Haitian insurrection directly challenged the system of racial hierarchy that had prevailed throughout the Atlantic world since the beginning of the colonial era" (p. 1).

This book explores the Haitian Revolution's dramatic impact on race relations in the colony through the experiences and perceptions of white eyewitnesses. Popkin has assembled a rich collection of first-person narratives of the revolution in Saint Domingue from the Ogé Insurrection in 1790 to Dessalines's massacres of whites in 1804. Some of the accounts are excerpts from published memoirs, while others are taken from unpublished journals, correspondence or court testimony. The authors are not well-known figures: little is known about most of them and several are anonymous. Creoles, or people born in the colonies, wrote most of the accounts, but some authors were from metropolitan France. The book is not merely a collection of documents. In introductions to each of the chapters, Popkin provides information about the texts, their authors, and the wider context for the events they describe. He uses these narratives to examine how the revolution in Saint Domingue shook the colonists' racial worldview to its core.

The book's introduction discusses the nature of this type of evidence. Popkin is compelled to address the fact that all of the authors are white. Recent studies on the Haitian Revolution have focused on slave participation, often seeking to restore historical agency to black slaves or free people of color by demonstrating that they acted according to their own initiatives and interests. Yet the lack of documents written by the insurgents has made it difficult to present or analyze the voices of non-white participants. To fill this gap some scholars have turned to notarial records: free people of color before 1789, and "new citizens" after the abolition of slavery in 1794, used the services of colonial notaries to enhance and protect their status. While illuminating, such records cannot fully overcome the dearth of sources written by non-whites. If the first-person accounts of white participants in this book provide

only a partial perspective, Popkin makes a convincing case that they communicate more than their authors' personal thoughts: they unintentionally give voice to people of other races encountered by the authors in the chaos and violence of events.

Popkin came to this topic by way of interest in the historical genre of "witness literature." The accounts of the insurrection in Saint Domingue reflect both the institutionalized practice of letter writing and the memoir literature generated by the French Revolution in Europe. Many of the authors describe their experiences as prisoners of the insurgents, and thus their accounts fit within the category of "captivity narratives." These texts describe terrifying ordeals, but Popkin recognizes the ethical problem of regarding them as the testimony of "victims." Most (but not all) of the authors defend slavery and white racial superiority, and their accounts could be seen as "perpetrator history." Popkin emphasizes the context and the moral complexities behind the personal narratives, however, and suggests they can be read with sympathy for the witness-victims without attributing moral innocence to them. The accounts describe encounters between individuals, rather than abstractions of race, and help to explain their choices and motives.

The book develops a number of key themes. The most important is the revolution's challenge to the authors' assumptions about racial hierarchy, and how their narratives often modify or contradict the formula of official accounts that depict a confrontation between civilized whites and barbaric blacks. Gros's published narrative describes the author's experiences following his capture by insurgents in October 1791. Gros emphasized the cruelty and brutality of the rebel leader Jeannot and insisted that all Negroes were prone to violence. Yet he was saved from torture and execution by another leader, Jean-François, who Gros served subsequently as secretary in negotiations between the insurgents and the Colonial Assembly. Popkin points out that such collaboration could not be fit easily within the colonial interpretation of events. Moreover, Gros's narrative praises Jean-François's humanity and intelligence. Such recognition of black compassion toward white captives was not unique. The author of an anonymous account of the first days of the slave insurrection in 1791 was also protected from violence, in this case by the revolt's original leader Boukman.

If the authors' experiences qualified their presumptions about black ferocity, they also contradicted the notion of black simplicity. Many narratives attest to the rebel slaves' rational objectives and to their leaders' intelligence. In particular, two of them provide observations of Louverture. Gros described him during the early stage of the revolution, when he was not yet a predominant figure, advocating negotiation with the Colonial Assembly for concessions and intervening to prevent the impulsive Biassou from killing white prisoners. Michel-Etienne Descourtilz, a metropolitan physician and naturalist, described Toussaint at the height of his power. Stating that, "he was worthy of being considered the natural genius forecast by Raynal," (p. 277) Descourtilz's picture of Louverture is of a prudent, courageous, at times hypocritical but intellectually gifted leader.

Some of the authors witnessed atrocities committed by other whites, and their narratives express disapproval and disillusionment. An anonymous author describes the arrest and imprisonment of four hundred free men of color in the airless hold of a merchant ship at Jérémie. While the "more reasonable class among the whites" protested, agents of the local council introduced smallpox into the floating prison: the author characterized this as "an act of barbarism and cruelty of which history offers no example, for which the inhabitants of Jérémie are responsible, and which still makes me shudder with horror" (p. 172). The colonist Le Clerc, who provides an account of the military campaign against insurgents at Limbé in November 1791, criticized his leaders for killing blacks who had surrendered. More disturbing for him, however, was the realization that one of the white female prisoners he helped to rescue was his former lover. Given that insurgents had raped the woman, Popkin suggests that Le Clerc's reaction reflected sexual jealousy and male dishonor: the colonial sexual order, in which black and colored women had been exploited by white men, had been violently inverted.

Another theme explored in the book is the ambiguous relationship between masters and their former slaves. If colonists demanded absolute obedience and deference from slaves, many also claimed that their slaves were both content and loyal. In an excerpt from the half poem, half prose narrative "Mon Odysee," the author described his return to Saint Domingue on the eve of revolution where the happy and well-cared for slaves on his family's plantation greeted their young master enthusiastically. Three first-person accounts presented in chapter nine examine this white ideal of the loyal slave. François Carteaux argued that the loyalty of his own slaves, who remained with him to work his fields, proved that the abolitionists were wrong: his blacks knew how much better off they were than the rebels starving in the forests. Pierre-Joseph Fondeviolle, however, expressed outrage at recognizing his former slave riding his horse as part of the rebel leaders' entourage. If claims of slave loyalty reflect white defense of slavery, it is nevertheless true that many blacks aided and even rescued their former masters.

The book also examines the role of the free people of color. The *gens de couleur* included freed blacks but also a growing mixed-race population. Members of this group occupied an ambiguous place in Saint Domingue's society prior to 1789. They provided colonial security, as members of the militia and the *maréchaussée*, and a growing number owned substantial property and slaves. Yet free people of color were subject to a broad range of racially discriminatory legislation. In 1789 Vincent Ogé traveled to France as one of a small group of elite *gens de couleur* to ask the National Assembly to grant them equal rights. The deputies rejected the request and Ogé returned to Saint Domingue in 1790 to lead a short-lived uprising of free men of color. The narrative of Louis-François-René Verneuil, who was briefly a prisoner of the colored rebels, suggests the ambiguity of Ogé's rebellion and the ambiguity of white attitudes towards this group. Although the free people of color were potential allies in the defense of slavery, whites tended to distrust them as threats to racial hierarchy. More than one account in this book suggests the tragic folly of such bigotry.

Another important theme is the colonial belief that metropolitan abolitionists and royalist counter-revolutionaries instigated the slave revolt in Saint Domingue. Colonial supporters of the French Revolution railed against the insidious influence of "philanthropists." Liberty and equality, according to these "patriots," did not extend to free people of color, let alone to slaves. What is more interesting, however, is that many of the accounts blame the slave revolt on a royalist plot. The anonymous author saved from death by Boukman claimed that his guards told him that important whites had ordered the insurrection to help to restore the king to his full powers: the guards believed that colonists had burned a royal decree granting slaves three days of freedom a week, and their captive accepted their claim of white encouragement because he could not believe blacks were capable of planning the revolt themselves. Gros went much further in asserting the existence of a counter-revolutionary conspiracy: "More than ever I was convinced that philanthropy was the cloak which the European aristocrats availed themselves of, assisted by their agents upon the spot, and artfully contrived and executed under it their infernal machinations" (p. 130). Gros accused Saint Domingue's administrators in general, and Governor Philibert-François Rouxel de Blanchelande in particular, of instigating the revolt and using it to destroy the colony.

Some of the accounts blame not royalism but the French Revolution for the slave insurrection. Chapter 12 presents excerpts from the unpublished play, "Le Philanthrope révolutionnaire ou l'hécatombe à Haïti," in which the lines spoken by black characters represent the motives for insurrection as imagined by whites. While these characters seem to confirm black barbarism, Popkin argues that the play sends mixed messages. "Spartacus," the slave leader, presents a serious indictment of slavery while the white characters offer no compelling defense of the system. The drama's real villain, however, is the fanatical French revolutionary who is based on civil commissioner Léger-Félicité Sonthonax. In June 1793 Sonthonax offered freedom to slave insurgents who would fight for the Republic, and in August he proclaimed general emancipation in Saint Domingue's North Province. Like the accusations of counter-revolutionary conspiracy, the denunciation of revolutionary fanaticism assumed that whites had incited and perhaps even directed black insurrection.

The pattern of personal narratives blaming other whites for the insurrection in Saint Domingue relates to another theme: the revolutionary struggle between whites. News of the French Revolution's outbreak in Europe divided colonists, pitting *petit-Blanc* "patriots" against planter "aristocrats." None of the narratives describe this white conflict before 1791, but various texts refer to it. According to the anonymous witness to the murder of free colored prisoners, Jérémie's council acted in the spirit of the "*Léopardins*" because they wanted to kill free men of color who were a counter-weight to the separatist faction. This refers to events in 1790 when the crew of the warship *Léopard* mutinied and rescued members of the Council of Saint Marc, who had proclaimed that Saint Domingue must become independent, before sailing to France. Including an account of this earlier struggle in the book would have helped not only to clarify the context of revolutionary struggle which preceded the outbreak of slave revolt, but also to explain the connection between resentment of metropolitan reforms and the threat of colonial secession.

The best illustrations of the factional struggle which overlapped with the slave insurrection are the accounts of the destruction of Cap Français in June 1793. Governor François-Thomas Galbaud came to Saint-Domingue to enforce the Law of 4 April 1792, granting free-colored equality, but he soon allied himself with the colony's patriots. Civil commissioners Sonthonax and Etienne Polverel arrested and imprisoned him aboard the French fleet. Galbaud's attack on Cap Français at the head of armed sailors caused Sonthonax to appeal to the black insurgents. Their intervention and burning of the town led most white residents to flee to the United States. The five narratives which make up Chapter 10 demonstrate the complexity of this struggle. The account of François Lapierre shows not only the sailors' hostility towards free men of color, but towards Rear Admiral Joseph Cambis and his officers who tried to protect them. Sailors and their patriot allies did not respect naval authority because it was based on executive power which, according to revolutionary ideology, was antithetical to the people's will. It would have been appropriate for Popkin to include the voices of representatives of the French state: civil commissioners, military officers, and colonial administrators like Blanchelande; and not only those of their enemies.

The book provides ample evidence of the horrific nature of insurrection and war in Saint Domingue. Descourtilz's narrative includes the savage fighting between black forces and the French troops of General Charles Victor Emmanuel Le Clerc's expedition. Descourtilz was taken prisoner shortly after Le Clerc's arrival in 1802 and forced to care for Dessalines's wounded; thus the doctor was present at the siege of Crête-à-Pierrot. Leonara Sansay provides an apocalyptic vision of Cap Français in the weeks before the final French evacuation. Her scandalous flirtation with General Rochambeau, as well as his cruelty to black prisoners and his tyranny over whites, seem metaphors for the corruption of colonial rule. Following the withdrawal of French forces, Dessalines ordered massacres of remaining whites. Peter Chazotte's eyewitness account of one episode at Jérémie conjures up images of the Holocaust.

The heroes who emerge from these accounts are individuals who were able to transcend racial prejudice and enmity. According to Chazotte's account, Dessalines sought to implicate free people of color in his massacres: the colored officer, Colonel Gaston, however, refused Dessalines's orders and killed himself rather than commit murder. Another narrative describes how black General Diakué, who was also appalled by the massacres, saved the young daughters of a slain white woman. In the chapter on the destruction of Cap Français, the white journalist H. D. de Saint-Maurice concludes his account by insisting that slavery was unjust and cannot be reestablished, that white colonists must accept this, return to Saint-Domingue, and help to restore peace and prosperity. The intolerance, hatred and violence which made such attitudes and such heroism rare were not simply the result of racial conflict; arguably, they are characteristic of revolution. This book, with its fascinating collection of personal narratives, helps to demonstrate and to explain the complexity and ambiguity of the Haitian Revolution.

William S. Cormack
University of Guelph
wcormack@uoguelph.ca

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172