

The Haitian Revolution:
The Absence of Compromise in the Darkest of Times

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“We have dared to be free. Let us dare to be so by ourselves and for ourselves.”

-Jean Jacques Dessalines

There have been many successful compromises in history; however, when looking back, it is often easy to overlook the struggles countries go through while attempting to find a compromise in conflict. Sometimes, those struggles become too much, and opportunities for compromises are cast aside, causing many lives to be lost. This was the case during the Haitian Revolution. In 1791, the French colony of Saint-Domingue was slowly being pulled apart by excessive tension among social classes.¹ Meanwhile, the French Government was too preoccupied with the revolution occurring in its own country to put in enough effort to “make a decisive difference,” in stopping the forthcoming insurrection.² Tired of inhumane treatment, the slaves of Saint-Domingue led one of the first successful slave rebellions, causing not only the conclusion of the slave trade in Haiti but also the freedom of the colony. This revolution pushed forward a new worldview regarding the roles citizens play in the government and how governments should handle human rights issues. Most importantly, the Haitian Revolution taught the world that taking a narrow-minded approach in altercations ends in continued conflict instead of compromise. Had the Saint Domingue citizens been willing to compromise, there would have been greater potential for a more peaceful end to the conflict.

¹ The colony originally identified as Saint-Domingue, but later changed their name to Haiti after gaining independence. The two names will be used interchangeably in this paper.

² Popkin, Jeremy. Telephone interview by the author. Bay View Middle School, Howard, WI. January 26, 2018.

Before It All Started -- What Was Missed

When the French Revolution began in 1789, there were many different social classes in the colony of Saint Domingue, which contributed to the Haitian Revolution in a dynamic way. The most powerful group was the *grand blancs*,³ who owned all of the plantations. In addition, there were the *petit blancs*,⁴ who were the tradespeople of the island and former servants. There were also the *gens de couleur*, who were illegitimate children of slaves and white plantation owners. For the most part, they lived just like the *grand blancs*, but they still encountered restrictions on the way they were allowed to dress and the work they were allowed to complete. Though they lived an overall successful life, the *gens de couleur* still wanted the rights given to the *grand blancs*. In addition to these social groups, there were also slaves; in fact, there were fifteen times more slaves than there were whites.⁵

By 1789, the French Revolution began, echoing cries for equality, freedom, and liberty and sparking inspiration for several small, unsuccessful revolutions in Haiti where there was great tension between social classes. Frustrated with having to deal with these movements, and wanting to maintain its grip on Haiti for financial benefits, the French Government tried to pacify the *gens de couleur* and ultimately prevent a revolution from occurring. Therefore, the General Assembly in Paris granted the island some abilities for self-governance.⁶ However, these new

³ Directly translates to “big whites”- “Grands Blancs.” The Louverture Project. Last modified August 23, 2007. Accessed April 4, 2018. https://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Grands_Blancs.

⁴ Translates directly to “little whites”- “Petits Blancs.” The Louverture Project. Last modified February 18, 2006. Accessed November 16, 2017. https://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Petits_Blancs.

⁵ In the year of 1789, there were approximately 500,000 slaves and 40,000 whites.

⁶ The General Assembly consisted of the Estates-General and the National Constituent Assembly and served from June 17 to July 9 of 1789 ———. *National Assembly (French Revolution)*. Accessed February 6, 2018. <https://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/National-Assembly-French-Revolution.pdf>.

self-governing laws only allowed for *gens de couleur* to have a say in government decisions and excluded *petits blancs* from having any role in the government.

Instead of its intended effect, the government angered the *petits blancs* and heightened the tension in the colony. This sudden change caused for a mass outbreak of confusion and anger, sparking a three-sided civil war between the different groups of descent: the slaves, the *gens de couleur*, and the whites. Inspired by the happenings in France, the enslaved black majority started their own revolution to make their voices heard. While the French Government did attempt to stop the uprising, the effort they put forth was weak and prolonged the conflict. Though the French Government was unable to “send much military force to the Caribbean because they were too busy defending France itself,” they could have acknowledged the complaints of all Haitian citizens.⁷ This would have allowed them to compose a variation of the first decree in which the *petits blancs* could have been allowed the same voting rights and representation in the government as with the *grands blancs* and other privileged groups, while still awarding limited rights to groups such as the *gens de couleur* and the slaves. If the two countries had taken the time to explain their viewpoints on how Haiti should be run, a compromise could have been reached. This compromise would have involved Haitian citizens giving up some control and allowing for slaves to have some rights which could have eliminated the overall conflict.

The Code Noir: What History Won't Tell You

⁷Interview with Professor Jeremy Popkin.

The French Government passed a series of decrees during this time period to limit the rights of the various social groups, though they were attempting to create peace. Two notable laws were the General Assembly's aforementioned unnamed decree and the Code Noir, which gave instructions as to how slave owners should treat their slaves. These decrees had the opportunity for a compromise within their lines; however, these opportunities were ultimately overlooked.

Those who owned slaves in the colony actively participated and kept up with the events occurring during the French Revolution. The slave owners wished to have rights for themselves that they did not currently possess, such as being able to decide how they should treat, punish, and reward their slaves whenever they needed instead of following the new set of rules put into effect by France.

King Louis XIV issued the Code Noir in 1685 with the intent to regulate the treatment of slaves; however, Haitian government officials did not enforce it, as the laws that were passed by French leaders had no effect in the colony.⁸ The act set guidelines for specific punishments for different offenses. For example, in article XLII, it states,

The masters may also, when they believe that their slaves so deserve, chain them and have them beaten with rods or straps. They shall be forbidden, however, from torturing them or mutilating any limb, at the risk of having their slaves confiscated and having extraordinary charges brought against them.⁹

⁸ In the Code Noir, it is stated that slaves are required to be given at least two pounds of beef or three pounds of fish every week, or 2 ½ pounds of manioc. However, slaves were most often given only a few potatoes and a bit of water each day. Louis, King, XIV. "The Code Noir" [The Black Code]. Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media. Last modified 1687. Accessed December 7, 2017. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/335/>.

⁹"The Code Noir"

However, cruel punishment techniques-- some of which included death, were still used on slaves if they misbehaved. The average slave in Haiti would only live to see seven years of service because of their treatment, and they suffered at the hands of both the slave owners and the French government.

Despite the controversy, some approved of the Code Noir's guidelines and called for them to be followed. As Professor Popkin states;

Some of the leaders of the black uprising appealed to the Code Noir because there were parts of it that required the white owners to feed their slaves decently and to give them clothing and provide medical care for them. The white slave owners had never done that. But certainly the Code Noir legalized slavery, and if you had decided you weren't going to accept being treated as a slave anymore then you couldn't accept the Code either.¹⁰

The Code Noir is another example of a failure to compromise. If the plantation owners had been lenient enough to provide their slaves with the required amount of food or clothing, perhaps the slaves would have been satisfied with the treatment they were receiving. Though accepting the conditions of the Code may not have stopped the revolution entirely, there is a possibility that it could have made the slaves more willing to compromise with the plantation owners and the French Government in the future.

When the Conflict Began

The tension in Haiti eventually grew to a point in which the slaves thought that the only way to earn their freedom was through war. The French Government and other Haitian social

¹⁰Interview with Professor Jeremy Popkin.

groups were not willing to negotiate, and the slaves wanted change to occur as soon as possible. Therefore, they took action.

On August 21, 1791, former slave Toussaint L'Ouverture led the slaves to rebel against the planters. By 1792, the slaves had control of approximately one third of the island. Though France attempted to dominate the rebellion and regain their complete control over the colony, the slaves used even more force and gained more power over the island. The fight for their rights resulted in the deaths of 100,000 blacks and 24,000 whites. Despite the casualties, the slaves managed to defeat the French and the British forces who arrived in 1793, both of which wanted control over the colony. The French and British withdrew their troops in 1798 because of their losses.

By 1801, L'Ouverture led his forces to conquer Santo Domingo, or what is now known as the Dominican Republic. His troops abolished slavery in the colony and then L'Ouverture declared himself Governor-General over all of Hispaniola. Following his takeover, the French Revolution had ended. The current ruler of France, Napoleon Bonaparte, dispatched his brother-in-law, General Charles Leclerc, along with 43,000 troops to capture L'Ouverture and his army and restore French rule and slavery. Leclerc's troops succeeded in capturing L'Ouverture, who afterwards was sent to France and later perished in prison in 1803.

With their only leader gone, the Haitian forces looked to Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a former slave, who led his troops at the Battle of Vertieres on November 18, 1803, where the Haitians defeated the French troops. On January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared the nation to be independent and renamed it Haiti. France was the first nation to recognize Haiti's independence,

and therefore Haiti became the first black republic to exist, and, in the Western Hemisphere, the second nation to gain independence from a European power.

All is Forgiven -- Or Is It?

Though the unnamed decree and the Code Noir were widely discussed at the time, there were some attempts at compromises that occurred behind closed doors. A negotiation that occurred around 1791 between military forces fighting for the *gens de couleur* and Lieutenant Tousard offered an opportunity for compromise that could have occurred if both sides were lenient in their goals.

A few years after the slave revolt began, citizens from all social classes began to grow tired from the fighting and wanted to attempt to negotiate a compromise. After seeing so many of their fellow men and soldiers fall victim to the conflict that was composed of two sides who were at a “deadly stalemate” they wanted to find some way to end it.

One of the main historical figures in the negotiations that occurred was Anne-Louis de Tousard. When he first arrived in Saint-Domingue, he was confident that he could talk with the *gens de couleur* and stop the insurrection by persuading plantation owners to forge an alliance with the *gens de couleur* who were fighting with the slaves. To preserve slavery, Tousard was willing to accept the *gens de couleur* as equals to the whites -- which is what they had wanted for years. Essentially, bringing the *gens de couleur* to fight for the white planters would guarantee a win on their behalf. Tousard was willing to form a compromise with the *gens de couleur* to attempt to save many lives and end the insurrection. He stated, “Why do you reject the help they offer and prefer to see them among the number of our enemies than to count them in the number

of our defenders?”¹¹ After realizing he also needed to include the slaves in this compromise, Tousard decided to offer them a safe passage to New England to help them to escape possible punishment.

However, as with many other agreements at the time, the proposed compromise involving the safe passage quickly fell apart. The 24th of September Decree stated that any laws passed by the French Government or the King would remain under the interpretation of the Colonial Assembly. The decree also stated that those who fought for the slaves in the revolution were to be forgiven, but it undid the past decree in which the *gens de couleur* were given rights. Eventually, the Colonial Assembly decided that the *gens de couleur* deserved the same rights as the plantation owners. This failed negotiation did not end the insurrection; it was merely another example of one of the efforts to compromise during this period.

Conclusion -- What Does the Revolution Teach Us About Compromise?

In today's world, it is rare to look for any opportunities for compromise before jumping right into warfare. The common misconception is that fighting is necessary to show one's dominance and that it will eventually lead to benefits. However, when looking back on history, it becomes apparent that this is not a logical conclusion; the Haitian Revolution is an excellent example of this. When reviewing the events of the insurrection, many different opportunities for compromise were ultimately cast aside. For example, when looking back on the first decree passed by the General Assembly, it is clear how the French Government being more observant as

¹¹ Mobley, Christina Frances. “*Make a Common Cause*”: *Negotiation and Failure to Compromise in the Haitian Revolution, 1791*. 2010. Accessed February 10, 2018. <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/indexablecontent/uuid:262d53d2-ef6b-4f22-8446-8f0f535843a2>.

to the happenings in the colony could have allowed for a compromise to be reached before the insurrection broke out. In addition, the government could also have been more perceptive regarding the overall attitude of the *petits blancs*, which in turn could have helped the different social groups gain the rights that they needed without having to initiate a revolution. Also, the Code Noir was a step towards compromise that was ultimately ignored by Haiti's government and by the white plantation owners. If what was stated in the Code had been followed, there is a possibility that the revolution would not have occurred or that it could have ended earlier with a compromise whose basis was on the Code. Lastly, the negotiations involving Toussard could have formed a compromise if the white plantation owners, the *gens de couleur*, and the slaves had listened to what each of the social groups wanted. Overall, the revolution teaches us that the most important thing in negotiations is listening to the other side. If this suggestion is followed in the future, conflicts can be solved by thoughtful compromises that benefit both sides. In a modern world where domestic legislatures and foreign relations are becoming increasingly polarized, the question becomes: are we ready to willingly make these compromises?

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