

Toussaint Louverture

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Louverture also spelled L'Ouverture, original name (until c. 1793) François Dominique Toussaint

born *c.* 1743, Bréda, near Cap-Français, Saint-Domingue [Haiti]
died April 7, 1803, Fort-de-Joux, France



Toussaint
Louverture, c.
1803.
Hulton
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Images

leader of the Haitian independence movement during the French Revolution, who emancipated the slaves and briefly established Haiti as a black-governed French protectorate.

Rise to power

Toussaint was the son of an educated slave; he acquired through Jesuit contacts some knowledge of French, though he wrote and spoke it poorly, usually employing the Creole patois and African tribal language. Winning the favour of the plantation manager, he became a livestock handler, healer, coachman, and finally steward. Legally freed in 1777, he married a humble woman who bore him two sons. Toussaint was homely, short, and small framed. He was a fervent Catholic, opposed to voodoo. He dressed simply and was abstemious and a vegetarian. Although he slept little, his energy and capacity for work were astonishing. As a leader he inspired awe and adulation.

A sudden slave revolt in the northern province (August 1791) found him uncommitted. After hesitating a few weeks, he helped his former master escape and then joined the black forces who were burning plantations and killing many Europeans and mulattoes (people of mixed African and European ancestry). He soon discerned the ineptitude of the rebel leaders and scorned their willingness to compromise with European radicals. Collecting an army of his own, Toussaint trained his followers in the tactics of guerrilla warfare. In 1793 he added to his original name the name of Louverture.

When France and Spain went to war in 1793, the black commanders joined the Spaniards of Santo Domingo, the eastern two-thirds of Hispaniola. Knighted and recognized as a general, Toussaint demonstrated extraordinary military ability and attracted such renowned warriors as his nephew Moïse and two future monarchs of

Haiti, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henry Christophe. Toussaint's victories in the north, together with mulatto successes in the south and British occupation of the coasts, brought the French close to disaster. Yet, in May 1794, Toussaint went over to the French, giving as his reasons that the French National Convention had recently freed all slaves, while Spain and Britain refused, and that he had become a republican. He has been criticized for the duplicity of his dealings with his onetime allies and for a slaughter of Spaniards at a mass. His switch was decisive; the governor of Saint-Domingue, Étienne Laveaux, made Toussaint lieutenant governor, the British suffered severe reverses, and the Spaniards were expelled.

By 1795 Toussaint Louverture was widely renowned. He was adored by blacks and appreciated by most Europeans and mulattoes for he did much to restore the economy. Defying French Revolutionary laws, he allowed many émigré planters to return, and he used military discipline to force the former slaves to work. Convinced that people were naturally corrupt, he felt that compulsion was needed to prevent idleness. Yet the labourers were no longer whipped: they were legally free and equal, and they shared the profits of the restored plantations. Racial tensions were eased because Toussaint preached reconciliation and believed that blacks, a majority of whom were African born, must learn from Europeans and Europeanized mulattoes.

Elimination of rivals

Though he worked well with Laveaux, Toussaint eased him out in 1796. Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, a terrorist French commissioner, also allowed Toussaint to rule and made him governor general. But the ascetic black general was repelled by the proposals of this European radical to exterminate the Europeans, and he was offended by Sonthonax's atheism, coarseness, and immorality. After some devious manoeuvres, Toussaint forced Sonthonax out in 1797.

Next to go were the British, whose losses caused them to negotiate secretly with Toussaint, notwithstanding the war with France. Treaties in 1798 and 1799 secured their complete withdrawal. Lucrative trade was begun with Britain and also with the United States. In return for arms and goods, Toussaint sold sugar and promised not to invade Jamaica and the American South. The British offered to recognize him as king of an independent Haiti, but, scornful of pompous titles, and distrustful of the British because they maintained slavery, he refused.

Toussaint soon rid himself of another nominal French superior, Gabriel Hédouville, who arrived in 1798 as representative of the Directory. Knowing that France had no chance of restoring colonialism as long as the war with England continued, Hédouville attempted to pit against Toussaint the mulatto leader André Rigaud, who ruled a semi-independent state in the south. Toussaint divined his purpose and forced Hédouville to flee. Succeeding Hédouville was Philippe Roume, who deferred to the black governor. Then a bloody campaign in 1799 eliminated another potential rival to Toussaint by driving Rigaud out and destroying his mulatto state. A purge that was carried out by Jean-Jacques Dessalines in the south was so brutal that reconciliation with the mulattoes was impossible.

Command of Hispaniola

Controlling all Saint-Domingue, Toussaint turned to Spanish Santo Domingo, where slavery persisted. Ignoring commands to the contrary by Roume and by Napoleon Bonaparte, who had become first consul of France, Toussaint overran it in January

1801, freed the slaves, and amazed the Europeans and mulattoes with his magnanimity.

In command of the entire island, Toussaint dictated a constitution that made him governor general for life with near absolute powers. Catholicism was the state religion, and many revolutionary principles received ostensible sanction. There was no provision for a French official, however, because Toussaint professed himself a Frenchman and strove to convince Bonaparte of his loyalty. He also described his success in restoring order and prosperity in epistles that, like all his writings, were ungrammatical yet testify to the grasp, incisiveness, and depth of a formidable intellect.

Bonaparte had confirmed Toussaint Louverture's position but saw him as an obstacle to the restoration of Saint-Domingue as a profitable colony. Toussaint knew Bonaparte despised blacks and planned to reinstitute slavery. He was also aware that Bonaparte would seek to intimidate the island upon making peace with England; therefore, he drilled a huge army and stored supplies. Yet Toussaint behaved ambiguously: venerating France, fearing Bonaparte, aging and growing weary, he trusted no one and failed to clarify his purposes. He desired above all to prevent a restoration of slavery while preserving the society he had built. Europeans and mulattoes looked hopefully to France to repress the huge black majority; on the other hand, many black leaders, such as Moïse, wanted to expel all Europeans and divide the plantations. Some blacks were alienated by Toussaint's perfidies and equivocations, his mysteriousness, and the occasional atrocities he thought necessary amid such dangers.

A French invasion under General Charles Leclerc began in January 1802 in far greater force than expected. Most Europeans and mulattoes defected to him; after a few weeks of furious fighting, the chief black leaders, even Christophe and Dessalines, sided with Leclerc as well. In May, Toussaint formally agreed to lay down his arms, in exchange for Leclerc's promise not to restore slavery. Perhaps he foresaw that yellow fever would destroy the French, as it did in the following year.

Leclerc gave Toussaint a spectacular welcome, and Toussaint retired in honour to a plantation. A few weeks later he attended a parley to discuss his personal situation. Suspected of plotting an uprising, he was seized and sent to Fort-de-Joux in the French Alps, where he was confined and interrogated repeatedly and where he died in April 1803.

John E. Fagg

Additional Reading

Biographical accounts favourable to Louverture include Wenda Parkinson, "*This Gilded African*": *Toussaint L'Ouverture* (1978), an introductory work; C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed., rev. (1963, reissued 1989), sound but with a Marxist bias; Ralph Korngold, *Citizen Toussaint* (1944, reissued 1979), a detailed study; and T. Lothrop Stoddard, *The French Revolution in San Domingo* (1914, reprinted 1970), a classic work favourable despite its antiblack bias. A critical study is Stephen Alexis, *Black Liberator: The Life of Toussaint Louverture*, trans. from French (1949), a work that is credulous in places. George F. Tyson, Jr. (ed.), *Toussaint L'Ouverture* (1973), includes about 40 pages of Toussaint's writings.

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