

The Black Spartacus: Toussaint L'Ouverture

By Ian Thomson, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff, Published:09/10/2017



Toussaint L'Ouverture, a portrait made in 1870, long after the Haitian general's death. Image by: George DeBaptiste/Library of Congress

In January 1804, the West Indian island of Saint Domingue became the world's first black republic. The African slaves toiling on the sugar plantations overthrew their French masters and declared independence. Following the revolt, the name Saint Domingue was replaced by the aboriginal Indian word Haiti, meaning "mountainous land." A

new Haitian flag was created by ripping the white band from the French tricolor.



The man who led the uprising was Toussaint L'Ouverture. A former slave, L'Ouverture fought and defeated the three mighty empires of France, Britain and Spain to transform Haiti into a cradle of liberty for enslaved Africans everywhere. This was half a century before the American civil war liberated the slaves of

the United States. Writer Patrick Leigh Fermor hailed L'Ouverture as the "black Spartacus" after the slave who challenged Rome, while for others, he is a herald of Marcus Garvey and Martin Luther King.

He was born in 1743 and taught himself to read

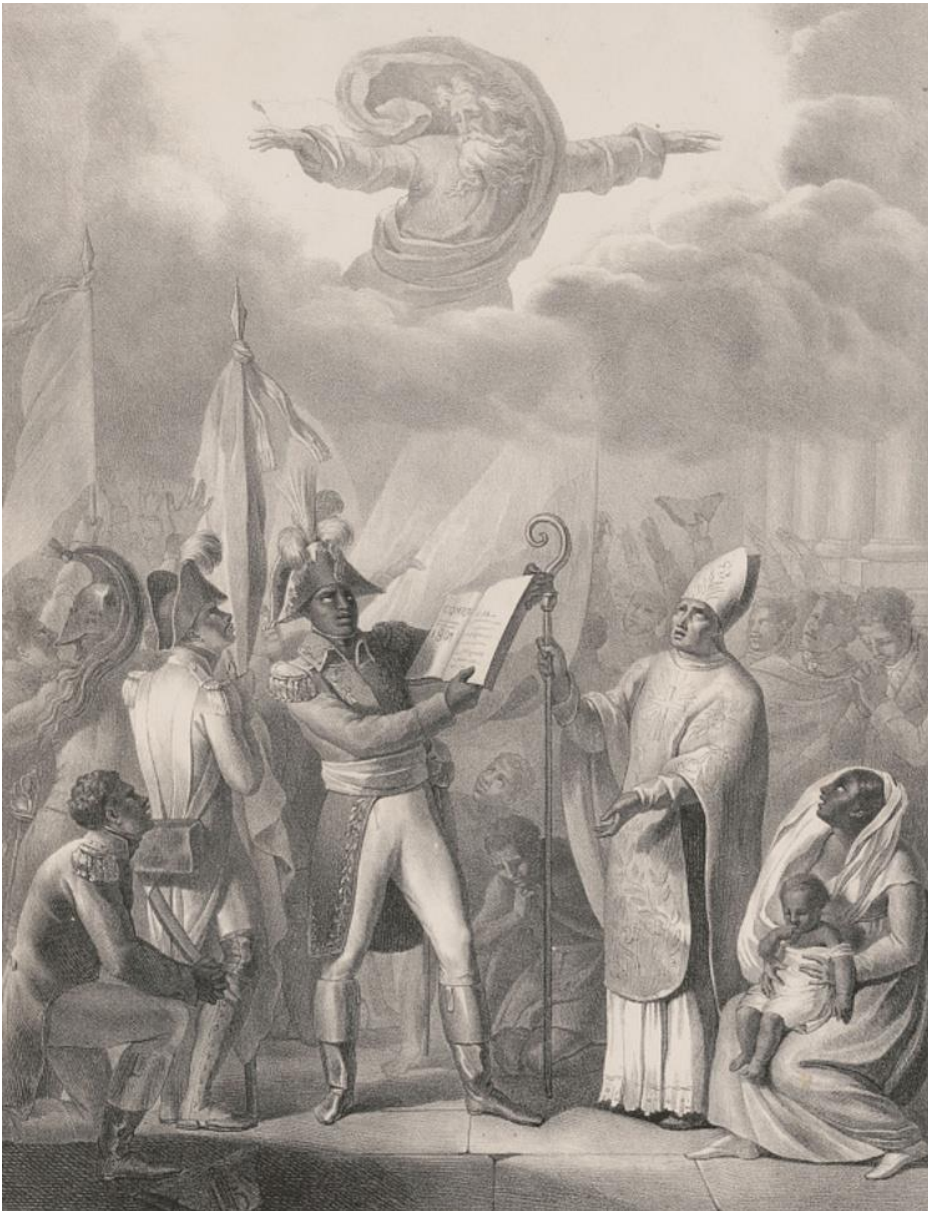
Born in northern Haiti in 1743, L'Ouverture was the grandson of a captured African chieftain. He himself was a slave until he was 45. In early childhood, he taught himself to read and he was familiar with Julius Caesar's military writings as well as the works of the French anti-slavery crusader Abbé Reynal.

Like most Haitians today, L'Ouverture was a believer in voodoo, a religion that combines Catholicism with African traditions. Most historians agree that Haiti's slaves first rose up in rebellion under a Jamaican voodoo priest named Boukman. On the

night of August 15, 1791, Boukman held a ceremony in which he called on the spirits of ancestral Africa to punish the plantation-owners. L'Ouverture is said to have taken part in the ceremony.

Within six weeks the island's rebel slaves had formed armies and their 12-year struggle for freedom had begun. More than a thousand French slave owners were killed and their plantations set ablaze.

Led a successful slave revolt



L'Ouverture led the only successful slave revolt in modern history. What made it possible? The French Revolution of 1789-91 had proclaimed equality among all men and slavery was deemed unacceptable. In 1794, the National Assembly in Paris ordered the French in colonial Saint Domingue to liberate their slaves. The colonists refused, as they considered Haiti and its plantations too valuable to give up.

L'Ouverture vowed to defeat these enemies of the new French Republic, but encountered fierce resistance. The prospect of a free black state founded on the murder and removal of its white community horrified the French colonists as surely as it did all the western world. It was not until 1862 that the United States recognized Haiti's independence.

British soldiers sent to put down rebellion

In 1793, England's King George III, who feared L'Ouverture's revolt might spread to the neighboring British slave colony of Jamaica, sent 27,000 troops to Haiti to put down the rebellion and perhaps seize

the island for Britain. The ensuing occupation turned out to be a disaster for the British. Tropical disease killed thousands of George III's Redcoat soldiers before they finally surrendered to L'Ouverture. It was the first time in history that a European army had surrendered to a black general.

At the time of his victory over England, L'Ouverture was still loyal to France and its revolutionary government. L'Ouverture had always acted as Napoleon's faithful representative, but when, in May 1801, he declared himself governor for life of the island, Napoleon was outraged.

An angry Napoleon invades island

In the winter of 1801, Napoleon abandoned his support of the Haitian uprising and organized an expedition to overthrow L'Ouverture. Contrary to all the principles of the French Revolution, he also set out to restore slavery on the island. The French set sail a week before Christmas, but L'Ouverture was ready for them. He set fire to coastal towns and awaited the invaders in the interior. When the French landed they assumed the entire island was ablaze.

Six months into Napoleon's invasion, on June 7, 1802, the French set a trap of their own. L'Ouverture was invited to meet with French governmental representatives, and despite warnings from his allies he agreed to attend the meeting. Upon arriving he was seized and handcuffed, and he was then shipped off to France, where he was locked in a mountain dungeon.

L'Ouverture dies in French jail



From his prison L'Ouverture pleaded with Napoleon for his release: "First Consul, father of all French soldiers, my wound is deep, apply a remedy to it."

A remedy had already been devised, however — as the Haitian lay sick with pneumonia, he was denied medical attention. On April 7, 1803, L'Ouverture was found dead in his cell (left). After 10 months in jail, he did not live to see the proclamation of the Haitian republic.

Napoleon has second thoughts about invasion

Fifteen years later Napoleon admitted that his campaign to oust L'Ouverture and restore slavery to Haiti had been a mistake. Yellow fever had devastated his armies and some of them had even defected to the rebel cause. After his losses in Haiti Napoleon was forced to sell the United States his territories west of the Mississippi River, including most notably Louisiana. That put an end to his dream of a new world empire in the Caribbean.

Let us end with L'Ouverture's own defiant words to Napoleon, written from his prison cell: "In overthrowing me, you have cut down only the trunk of the Tree of

Liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are numerous and deep."