

The First Days of the Slave Insurrection in Saint-Domingue (Haiti)

The insurrection that was ultimately to lead to the destruction of slavery in Saint-Domingue and the creation of the independent Republic of Haiti began on the night of 22–23 August 1791. The anonymous author of this account, entitled “The revolution of Saint-Domingue”, was one of the first whites to experience the uprising’s effects. He was taken prisoner on the first night of the uprising and owed his life to the intervention of Boukman, the first leader of the movement. The author was asleep on the night of 22 August when a shot rang out.

At the sound of the gunshot, my dog who was lying in the gallery near my bedroom started to bark loud enough to wake me. Wrongly irritated by this continual barking, I got up to quiet him down, and then went back to sleep. Fifteen minutes later, the poor dog started up again even more insistently. But, alas, it was too late to wonder what was happening, the blacks had already taken over all the paths around the *grand’case* [the plantation owner’s house]. Hearing the noise they were making, I jumped out of my bed and shouted: “Who goes there?” A voice like thunder answered me: “It is death!” At the same time, I heard a considerable number of gunshots and the voice of a horde of blacks who filled the house with these terrible words: “Kill, kill.” Seeing what was happening, and having no way to escape, I ran to get my pistols. Luckily for me, they were not loaded; I say luckily because if they had been, I would have defended myself, I would have killed some of these assailants and would not have been able to escape succumbing to their blows.

In the blink of an eye the shutters and curtains of my windows, which were of a man’s height, were broken through. To escape the shots fired at me, I bounded into the space behind my bed, and there I waited, trembling, to be discovered. Several blacks who had come into my room and thought they had killed me in my bed began pillaging, while others who wanted my blood and my belongings bashed against the door to force it open. Judge, dear reader, if my situation was alarming! The shots that I heard being fired in my relatives’ apartment, which was at the other end of the building, told me that they were no longer alive. Given the fury and the determination of these wretches, if I had been found, I would surely have suffered the same fate.

An hour went by in this cruel dilemma, during which I heard them listing the victims. The blacks, finding nothing more to steal, opened the door that had remained closed. A crowd of new assailants entered, uttering horrible cries, and poking the bed to make sure I was dead, but when they didn’t find me, they yelled like madmen: “He got away, he got away.” They all suddenly ran out of the house to look for me in the brush, which revived me a little and gave me some hope of surviving. I thought that they wouldn’t come back into my room, but I was wrong. The black who had answered me when I had cried “Who goes there?” realized that I could not have escaped; he entered my room, and others soon followed. While they poked under the bed with their sabers, another one investigated the space behind it. Ah, no matter how I tried to make myself small . . . the black who kept sticking his hand in there touched my shoulder. . . . What a shock! My heart nearly stopped, a deathly fear seized me, the black jumped back with a start and cried like a madman: “He’s still there.” I gave up trying to hide: I approached these blacks and said to them: “Take everything I’ve got, but leave me my life.” They answered me in a mocking tone: “What does he want us to take, there’s nothing left in his closet” [que ça l’y vlé nou prend, ni a poin a rien encore dans buffet a li]; as they spoke, they went out and closed the door behind themselves. Then the whole band, like a pack of wolves about to tear into a lamb, entered the house. Cries of “load your guns” from all sides made it clear to me that the climax of the tragedy was approaching. I tore my hair, I bit my fists, I bashed myself against the walls, in a word my anger boiled over. I tried to flee through the window, but it was no use. Seeing that death was inevitable, I just wanted it to come from a bullet, so that, with the thread of my days snapped all at once, I wouldn’t have to suffer the cruel torment that the ferocity of these barbarians was bound to imagine.

Fate decided otherwise: the commander of this bloody horde, named Boukman, whom I had always treated well, arrived at this point and, seeing me in my room, whose door was half broken, all bloody and desperate, had pity on me. He addressed his men and told them firmly: “Don’t kill him, he’s a good white and knows more than the others around here.” The reason he said this is that, when I had surveyed the plantation, I had chosen him as an assistant because he was the most intelligent of them (he had been astonished to see that I could determine the distance from one point to another without pacing it off, leading him to think that I was smarter than other whites). I was quite surprised to hear such words because I would not have thought him susceptible, in these circumstances, of so much humanity. In the moment of indescribable joy that took the place of my horrible fear, I do not know if it was by my own movement or that of some blacks (I don’t know exactly where I was at that moment), but, having opened the door in front of which a crowd of these unfortunates were drawn up, and having thrown myself, all trembling, into the midst of them, I was nearly sacrificed just when I thought I had been saved and when I was already saying to them: “What did I do to make you want to kill me?” Several blacks, their sabers raised and their pistols pointed, were about to kill me if Boukman had not quickly gotten me out of their sight by wrapping his arms around me.