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The Forgotten Revolution

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Introduction

The Haitian Revolution is one of the most remarkable and consequential events in world history—yet, paradoxically, it is a revolution that has been consigned to the margins of our collective memory. It stands as the only successful slave uprising, one in which the enslaved population not only shattered their own chains, but also permanently overturned a system of brutal exploitation at the heart of the colonial Atlantic world. The revolutionaries of Saint-Domingue—who forged the new nation of Haiti—achieved what few dared to imagine possible: the abolition of slavery and the creation of the first Black republic in the modern era. This was not merely a local or regional drama, but a transformational episode with global repercussions, fundamentally challenging established ideas about race, freedom, citizenship, and empire.

Yet despite the Haitian Revolution's radical achievements and enduring influence, it has long been "forgotten" in mainstream historical narratives. In textbooks and popular histories, it is often eclipsed by the French and American revolutions, both of which are heralded as defining moments in the rise of democracy and human rights. The omission is not accidental. The silencing of the Haitian Revolution reflects deep-rooted anxieties about the possibilities of Black self-determination, about the legitimacy of radical social change from below, and about the contradictions at the core of Western ideals of liberty and equality. For generations, powerful interests—slaveholders, imperialists, and even historians—have minimized or deliberately erased Haiti's story, fearing its example and questioning its place in the canon of world revolutions.

This book seeks to redress that erasure. It aims to restore the Haitian Revolution to its rightful place at the center of the Age of Revolution and to illuminate its ripple effects across the Americas, Europe, and beyond. The chapters that follow reconstruct the world of Saint-Domingue before the uprising: a world defined by unimaginable wealth and by its enormous human cost, where Enlightenment philosophy mingled with the realities of bondage and resistance. The narrative then dives into the tumultuous events from 1791 to 1804, charting the emergence of extraordinary leaders—such as Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines—and tracking the shifting alliances, battles, betrayals, and unwavering hope that defined the revolutionary struggle.

But the Haitian Revolution did not end with independence. Its aftermath confronted Haiti with daunting tests: military threats, economic isolation, and the continuing struggle to convert revolutionary ideals into just governance. The new nation's experience forced the world to reckon with questions that remain vital today: Who is entitled to freedom? What is the meaning of citizenship when it has been so long

denied? What does it cost to build a new society from the ashes of systematic oppression?

Above all, this book contends that to forget Haiti is to misunderstand the very foundations of the modern world. The revolution's echoes can be heard in the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, in the expansion and contradictions of American liberty, in Latin American independence, and in the global quest for racial equality and human rights. The suppression of its memory—whether through racism, political fears, or intellectual neglect—has impoverished our understanding of the age of revolutions and the ongoing struggles for justice.

By weaving together vivid story, scholarly inquiry, and the voices of those who shaped the revolution, *The Forgotten Revolution* invites readers to reconsider the history they have inherited. To remember Haiti is to confront the full, unsettling, and inspiring possibilities of universal freedom. As the world continues to wrestle with issues of race, inequality, and liberation, the story of the Haitian Revolution is not only a vital lesson from the past—it is a clarion call for the future.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Jewel of the Antilles: Saint-Domingue in the Eighteenth Century

Before the cataclysm that would reshape global history, there was Saint-Domingue, a sun-drenched sliver of land on the western third of the island of Hispaniola. To the European powers of the late eighteenth century, it was nothing short of a jewel, the most glittering prize in their vast colonial empires. Its very name, Saint-Domingue, conjured images of unimaginable wealth, a testament to the brutal efficiency with which France had transformed a Caribbean island into an economic powerhouse.

Imagine, if you will, standing on the verdant slopes overlooking the teeming port of Cap-Français, the colonial capital. The air would have been thick with the sweet, cloying scent of sugar cane, the pungent aroma of coffee beans, and the acrid smoke from sugar refineries. Below, the harbor would have been a forest of masts—ships from Bordeaux, Nantes, and Marseille, their holds soon to be crammed with the riches of the colony. This was a land of staggering contrasts, where immense natural beauty masked a system of unparalleled human suffering.

Saint-Domingue's geographic position was a key factor in its rapid ascent. Situated in the heart of the Caribbean, it was ideally placed for transatlantic trade routes. The island's fertile plains and mountainous interior provided diverse ecosystems, perfect for cultivating a range of highly profitable cash crops. While sugar was king, vast quantities of coffee, indigo, and cotton also poured from its plantations, feeding the insatiable appetites of European consumers and textile mills.

The French had wrested control of the western part of Hispaniola from the Spanish in the late seventeenth century, and by the 1700s, they had perfected a system of agricultural production that generated truly astonishing profits. This was not a modest farming enterprise; it was an industrial-scale operation, designed to extract maximum wealth from the land and, more importantly, from the labor of enslaved Africans. By the eve of the revolution, Saint-Domingue was producing more sugar and coffee than all of the British West Indies combined. Its output was so immense that it supplied a significant share of the world's demand for these commodities, making France fabulously rich in the process.

This prosperity, however, came at a monstrous cost, etched into the bodies and souls of hundreds of thousands of enslaved people. The wealth of Saint-Domingue was directly proportional to the brutality of its labor system. The French planters, driven by the relentless pursuit of profit, implemented intensive and merciless methods of production. Life for an enslaved person on a Saint-Domingue plantation was a

relentless cycle of back-breaking labor, horrific violence, and rampant disease. The average lifespan for an enslaved person after arriving on the island was shockingly short, often just a few years. This grim reality meant a constant demand for new arrivals from Africa, perpetuating the brutal transatlantic slave trade.

The colony's population figures tell a stark story of this human cost. By the late 1780s, Saint-Domingue was home to approximately 550,000 people. Of these, a staggering 500,000 were enslaved Africans, vastly outnumbering their white oppressors. This demographic imbalance, a ticking time bomb of suppressed humanity, was a constant source of anxiety for the white colonists, even as they indulged in their opulent lifestyles. The sheer scale of the enslaved population meant that the colony was, in essence, a vast open-air prison, maintained by fear, terror, and the systematic dehumanization of its majority inhabitants.

The social fabric of Saint-Domingue was rigidly stratified, a complex and volatile hierarchy built on race and wealth. At the apex were the *grands blancs*, the wealthy white planters. These were the owners of the vast sugar and coffee plantations, the merchants who controlled the lucrative trade, and the high-ranking colonial officials. They lived lives of immense luxury, their fortunes built directly on the sweat and suffering of others. Many *grands blancs* harbored resentments against metropolitan France, believing that the distant crown imposed too many restrictions on their commercial activities and extracted too much in taxes. They dreamed of greater autonomy, perhaps even outright independence, mirroring the recent American Revolution. However, their vision of liberty was, of course, strictly for themselves, certainly not for the enslaved.

Below the *grands blancs* were the *petit blancs*, the "small whites." This diverse group included artisans, shopkeepers, overseers, clerks, and teachers. Many owned a handful of enslaved people, but their economic standing was precarious compared to the powerful planters. They often resented the dominance of the *grands blancs*, feeling economically squeezed and socially overlooked. Their anxieties were amplified by the presence of a third, increasingly influential, social group: the free people of color.

The free people of color, or *gens de couleur libres*, constituted a significant and complex segment of Saint-Domingue society, numbering around 30,000 by 1789. This group was primarily composed of mulattoes—individuals of mixed European and African descent—but also included free Black people. Many free people of color had achieved considerable wealth, owning plantations and, ironically, enslaved people themselves. They often dressed in European fashion, spoke French, and aspired to full equality with the white colonists. Despite their economic successes and cultural assimilation, they faced pervasive racial discrimination. They were barred from holding public office, from certain professions, and from marrying white individuals. Their desire for equal rights, particularly the right to vote and hold political office, would

become another combustible element in the pre-revolutionary landscape.

At the very bottom of this brutal hierarchy, and indeed, the vast majority of the population, were the enslaved Africans. Torn from their homelands, subjected to the horrors of the Middle Passage, and then thrust into the relentless machinery of the plantation economy, their lives were characterized by unrelenting toil and unimaginable cruelty. They worked from dawn till dusk, often longer, under the constant threat of the whip. Flogging, mutilation, and other barbaric punishments were routine methods of control. Disease, malnutrition, and exhaustion were constant companions. The enslaved population was a mix of African-born individuals, who brought with them diverse languages, cultures, and spiritual traditions, and Creole-born individuals, who had been born into slavery on the island.

Despite the pervasive oppression, resistance to slavery was a constant, if often clandestine, feature of life in Saint-Domingue. It manifested in various forms, from subtle acts of sabotage and feigned illness to outright rebellion. Runaway slaves, known as maroons, formed communities in the island's remote mountains and forests, frequently launching raids on plantations and serving as a constant symbol of defiance. These maroon communities, often led by charismatic figures, kept the flame of resistance alive. François Mackandal, a Vodou priest and maroon leader from the mid-eighteenth century, was a particularly influential figure, inspiring fear in the colonists and hope among the enslaved through his purported mystical powers and his organization of poison plots against white masters. His legend, passed down through oral traditions, foreshadowed the larger uprising to come.

The world of Saint-Domingue was, therefore, a powder keg. The enormous wealth it generated for France rested precariously on the backs of an enslaved majority, seething with a desire for freedom. The white colonists were fractured by internal rivalries and resentments against the distant metropole, while the free people of color agitated for their denied rights. This intricate web of privilege, oppression, and simmering discontent, combined with the explosive ideas sweeping across the Atlantic, set the stage for a revolution that would not only shake the foundations of this lucrative colony but reverberate across the entire world. The stage was set, the actors were in place, and the curtain was about to rise on a drama that would redefine the very meaning of liberty.

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