

French atrocities during the Haitian War of Independence

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This article analyzes the atrocities committed by French troops during the Leclerc–Rochambeau expedition, which Napoléon Bonaparte sent to Saint-Domingue (Haiti) in 1802–1803. These emerged as a local response to a variety of factors, particularly the military difficulties encountered by the expedition’s leaders. Atrocities were numerous and ranged from mass executions of colonial troops and rebel cultivators (particularly by hanging and drowning) to less numerous, but more cruel, forms of punishment (such as burning at the stake and the use of man-eating dogs). Though the expedition’s leaders wrote of carrying a war of ‘extermination’ that would ultimately destroy the adult black population of the colony, they never had the opportunity to carry out such an agenda, which furthermore was aimed more at a rebel social class than a given race. French atrocities, however horrendous, thus only partly meet the modern-day standards for genocide.

In the fall of 1801, the beginning of Year X in the French revolutionary calendar, First Consul Napoléon Bonaparte launched the largest overseas venture of his reign, a military expedition bound for the French colony of Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti). Led by Bonaparte’s brother-in-law Victoire Emmanuel Leclerc, the troops were instructed to overthrow Saint-Domingue’s governor Toussaint Louverture, whom Bonaparte suspected of planning to declare independence, and possibly to restore slavery. The expedition proved a disaster for France and rebel forces declared Haiti’s independence two years later.

For Bonaparte’s formidable legions to be vanquished was exceptional enough to be noticed, but the Haitian War of Independence was also notable for its extraordinary levels of violence. Over 50,000 French soldiers and civilians died during the expedition, while the colony’s total population, which had neared 600,000 in 1789, fell to half that number by 1804.¹ These losses partly stemmed from disease, conventional combat and massacres of white civilians, but they were also the result of the exactions committed against the population of color during a conflict that turned into a war of extermination in 1802–1803—what a later age might label an attempted genocide. Hanging, drowning, burning, man-hunting dogs and crucifixion: to this day, in the Haitian popular imagination, the period remains as a potent symbol of the horrors of colonial rule.

French atrocities, by contradicting the generous revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, raise a number of questions pertaining to responsibility and motive. In a 2005 book that sparked much public controversy in France when it appeared, Claude Ribbe placed the blame for such horrors squarely on the shoulders of Bonaparte, whose stated aim was allegedly the eradication of the black population of Saint-Domingue and whose policies, in Ribbe's view, effectively foreshadowed the Final Solution.²

Most historians in France and Haiti have been more circumspect, casting instead Donatien de Rochambeau, who led the expedition after Leclerc's death from yellow fever, as the villain of the tale. Rochambeau's actions are also often portrayed as the irrational act of a vicious madman, rather than a coherent genocidal plan designed in Paris and exemplary of French racial thought.³ Because Haitian history has evolved in relative isolation, few historians aside from Bernard Gainot have tried to analyze the events of 1802–1803 within a larger theoretical context (namely, the use of violence during the French Revolution and in French colonies), adding to the general feeling that the atrocities were an aberration.⁴

Drawing from the historical record, one can paint a more nuanced picture that eschews one extreme (atrocities as a genocidal plot hatched in Paris) and the other (atrocities as an oddity attributable to a wayward madman). Despite sponsoring reactionary policies in the rest of the French empire, Bonaparte was surprisingly moderate when it came to Saint-Domingue, where Louverture's large army and a restive population made it dangerous to advocate an immediate restoration of slavery. He thus made no official call to forsake the law of emancipation, nor did he advocate the extermination of the colony's population of color. Instead, he hoped that political ruse would pave the way for a relatively bloodless restoration of direct French rule. The decision to resort to ever-harsher methods against Dominguan rebels was thus taken in the colony itself, not only by Rochambeau but also by a variety of French soldiers and officers, starting with Leclerc, who is frequently described as a tragic hero.

These historical actors usually acted rationally in an attempt to fulfill goals, such as pacifying the colony or making money, that were not always racial in nature. Only during a specific period—the mass drowning of October 1802—did the atrocities approach the level of a *bona fide* racial war. Recent works have emphasized the racial complexity of Saint-Domingue's society and politics,⁵ but this historiographical shift has not yet trickled into analyses of violence during the War of Independence. 'What are the main characteristics of the violent conflicts that degenerate into massacres?' asked Bernard Gainot in reference to Saint-Domingue. 'First of all, their strong ethnic nature. Colonial society was profoundly divided by racial prejudices. Ethnic group thus fought ethnic group, from the lynching of free people of color in 1790 all the way to Dessalines's albeit radical order to exterminate the whites in 1804'.⁶

Whether the French Revolution marked a qualitative shift in the type and extent of political violence is another highly debated issue. Some scholars like Reynald Secher have presented the Terror as a fundamentally new and modern event that

prefigured the great state-sanctioned genocides of the twentieth century (an argument similar to Ribbe's take on 1802 Saint-Domingue).⁷ In response, Jean-Clément Martin defended the non-exceptionality of the Terror by showing a continuum between the state-sanctioned violence employed by traditional monarchies, the political violence of the French Revolution and the atrocities committed in the colonial arena and on the battlefield (an argument similar to Gainot's view that the 1802 atrocities were continuations of colonial-era racism).⁸

The Leclerc-Rochambeau expedition to Saint-Domingue did not fit these two extremes. It was not a modern genocide, nor was it experienced by contemporaries as business as usual. Instead, it was marked by four distinct periods that allow us to draft a taxonomy of violence. As befitted a campaign intended to overthrow Louverture and his officers, violence committed after the initial French landing in the spring of 1802 was mostly military in nature. Though costly in human lives, it fell within the norms of contemporary warfare. It was only in the summer and fall of 1802 that a systematic campaign of terror was put in place in order to disarm the black population. Its purpose can be described as social re-engineering, since it pitted the labouring masses against landowning elites. Bonaparte and Rochambeau's critics notwithstanding, it was Leclerc who began the third phase, a war of extermination, when he ordered the mass drowning of colonial units in the fall of 1802. Rochambeau's violence was never as systematic, and his tenure saw a shift to a fourth era reminiscent of the Old Régime's colonial policies and marked by the use of cruel and unusual punishments.

In the end, neither mass murder nor refined tortures brought about the eradication of the population of color or the cowing of France's enemies. Instead, acts of violence pushed hesitant civilians and colonial troops into rebel ranks, thus playing an important role in helping to bring about the independence of Haiti and in shaping Haitian public memory of the revolution.

Bonaparte's plans (autumn 1801)

Napoléon Bonaparte's reputation in France has sunk markedly in recent years as scholars and the general public paid growing attention to his 1802 decision to restore slavery in parts of the colonial empire, thus reneging on a 1794 law abolishing slavery. Though generally avoiding Ribbe's more extreme accusations, virtually all scholars, such as Laurent Dubois, have faulted him for planning to restore slavery in Saint-Domingue at the behest of the planter lobby.⁹ His plans for Saint-Domingue, however, were far more nuanced than is usually assumed. He never called for systematic massacres, nor did he order Leclerc to restore slavery in Saint-Domingue (though he left open that possibility for the long term). Unwilling to lead a frontal assault against Louverture's 20,000-strong colonial army, Bonaparte planned to use ruse rather than force and publically and privately opposed controversial measures like an immediate restoration of slavery.¹⁰

Rightly banking that Louverture, who had ruled Saint-Domingue with an iron fist for three years, had grown unpopular, Bonaparte planned to achieve his goals in large part by political means, namely, by gaining the support of the colonial

army and population. With 20,000 troops in the first expeditionary fleet, Leclerc was given the means to prevail militarily if negotiations failed, but nonviolent methods had Bonaparte's preference. His secret instructions to Leclerc made no reference to mass drowning; the harshest form of punishment mentioned in the document was deportation to France (Ribbe's claim that Bonaparte was planning a war of extermination is based on some alleged oral instructions).¹¹

In his instructions, Bonaparte also directed Leclerc to maintain Louverture's system of 'free black cultivators' so as to prevent a desperate, drawn-out conflict in which former slaves would rise en masse to defend their freedom.¹² For Bonaparte to restore slavery outright, a planter had warned, would likely spark such popular opposition that 'he would have to employ the atrocious method of destruction and leave not a single negro alive in the islands where liberty prevails'.¹³ Such massacres made no financial sense when Saint-Domingue's single most valuable asset was its population of plantation labourers, which had been imported at tremendous cost from Africa. Moreover, an alternative to slavery existed in the form of Louverture's strict cultivator system, which tied former slaves to the land and which had brought about a partial recovery of the plantation economy. By maintaining the cultivator system, Bonaparte hoped to bring the colony back to prosperity without pushing the labouring masses into open revolt; he could even employ former slaves in offensive operations against the British.¹⁴

Rather than some ruinous war of extermination (Ribbe) or an immediate return to slavery (Dubois), Bonaparte's primary goal was thus to maintain the cultivator system and restore direct French authority in Saint-Domingue, all of this, he optimistically hoped, to be accomplished without resorting to inordinate levels of violence so as to spare the colony's valuable labourers.

The spring campaign and military violence (February–April 1802)

Leclerc was a French-born son of the bourgeoisie who had spent his entire career in the revolutionary army in Europe.¹⁵ His primary goals in the expedition, accordingly, were not to restore slavery or exterminate blacks to fulfill some long-standing racial agenda, but to deport colonial officers as ordered by Bonaparte and, on a more personal level, to make a quick fortune and return to France. Blissfully unaware of the difficulties he would encounter, he anticipated a short, victorious and relatively bloodless campaign.¹⁶

After he landed in Saint-Domingue in February 1802, Leclerc tried to win over the colonial population by promising not to restore slavery.¹⁷ When the commander of Cap-Français (Cap-Haïtien) opposed his landing nonetheless, he called on the rebel rank-and-file to join the French side.¹⁸ Two weeks later, he also used Louverture's sons in a belated attempt to strike a negotiated settlement with their father.¹⁹

The failure of the negotiations incited Leclerc to resort to Bonaparte's plan B, a military campaign against Louverture's colonial army. Lasting until May 1802, it proved bloody for both sides but did not mark the beginning of a policy of state-sanctioned terror since most of the deaths resulted from conventional fighting, not

executions. What atrocities were committed by French troops took the form of localized acts of vengeance following military setbacks or rebel massacres of white civilians. Six hundred rebel wounded found inside the fort of Crête-à-Pierrot were put to the sword in April 1802, for example, but the French soldiers who committed the act viewed it as payback for the unexpectedly heavy losses they had sustained during the siege. A French officer also cited his troops' anger upon encountering the remains of hundreds of French civilians massacred in the same area by Louverture's second, Jean-Jacques Dessalines.²⁰ The division of General Jean Hardÿ was involved in two other incidents in which hundreds of rebel prisoners were shot in cold blood. Hardÿ's contemporary letters reveal nothing that would explain his motives for allowing these massacres to happen, but they do mention the losses that his men had suffered as they trekked across rebel-infested mountains, so vengeance and exasperation were most likely at play in those two cases as well.²¹

These exactions ran contrary to Leclerc's standing orders. Still hopeful that he could win over Saint-Domingue's black population and fulfill Bonaparte's grand political strategy, he instructed his troops not to rape female plantation labourers, reiterated earlier pledges that he would not restore slavery and promised to bring an end to martial law as soon as feasible.²² In a conflict that still largely involved professional units, mass executions also violated the norms of war delineated by Emer de Vattel (such as the need to spare disarmed prisoners). Rebel and French soldiers, who all fought under the French flag and in French uniforms, were also eager to portray themselves as estranged brothers rather than mortal enemies.

Leclerc's relative leniency paid off. Many black cultivators refused to heed Louverture's calls for help because they remembered the strict discipline imposed on Saint-Domingue's plantations by black colonial officers, most of whom, convinced that Bonaparte's army was invincible or enticed by monetary promises, eventually joined the French side as well. Abandoned by his subordinates, Louverture signed a ceasefire in May 1802 and was deported to France a month later on charges that he was plotting a second uprising.

The disarmament campaign and social warfare (June–August 1802)

After a brief interlude, fighting resumed in June 1802 when groups of runaway plantation cultivators revolted in central and northern Saint-Domingue. The *casus belli* was Leclerc's decision to disarm civilians and send them back to the plantations, which convinced many cultivators that he would soon forsake emancipation.²³

The war was not yet a racial one since black colonial officers who had abandoned Louverture during the spring campaign remained in French employ until October 1802. They may have considered it judicious to wait until after yellow fever had taken its toll before attacking the French; many were also prominent landowners eager to disarm their workforce. Dessalines, who had become infamous during Louverture's governorship for his severity in punishing recalcitrant labourers, was used in a similar capacity by Leclerc.

Where the spring campaign had been a classic military and political struggle between French and Dominguan officers vying for the control of the colonial government, the disarmament campaign was thus a more profound class struggle pitting freedmen and freedwomen against plantation owners of any race accused of plotting to re-enslave them. Pointing to their child, some women told a French officer that they ‘would prefer to dismember their infant than see him enslaved’.²⁴

Disarming the cultivators and forcing them back to their plantations proved a difficult endeavour. Drawing on a decade of revolutionary upheavals, the cultivators waged a guerrilla war of arson and ambushes in Saint-Domingue’s hilly interior, where the ponderous French columns were at a marked disadvantage. The French eventually developed effective counterinsurgency methods—such as destroying the rebels’ food crops—but losses to combat and especially yellow fever meant that Leclerc did not have the manpower to put them in practice everywhere at once.²⁵ By late July, his strategic reserve was wholly depleted.²⁶

As standard military operations failed to stamp the cultivator uprising, Leclerc concluded that ramping up repressive measures was the only way to enforce social peace. In June, he asked his subordinates to imprison rebel cultivators and shoot their leaders. By July, he issued a much stricter legal code that called for anyone resisting authority or found with weapons in his or her hands to be shot. By August, all gang drivers and the manager were liable to be shot if a single unregistered gun was found on a plantation, a policy that lumped together rebellious field hands and the more elite people of color used as management personnel.²⁷

Methods of execution adapted to the changing nature of the conflict. Until July, most rebels were executed by firing squad, as befitted foes taken in a military campaign. But late that month Pierre Boyer, a French general with a personal taste for violence, began hanging people instead.²⁸ This mode of execution quickly spread in August. Gallows were often set up in public areas such as market squares in the hope that they would make an impression on the black population, especially the merchant women who were accused of inciting cultivators to rebel.²⁹

Summary executions violated the Vattel-sanctioned norms of war but the nature of the enemy provided a legal loophole. The spring campaign had primarily involved organized military units, whereas the disarmament campaign was a counterinsurgency operation against irregular forces. ‘French soldiers did not feel like they were fighting a regular army, but brigands’, wrote Gainot: ‘at best, rebels, at worst, bands that cut themselves off from civilization by their methods’.³⁰

Mass drowning of colonial units (September–October 1802)

Leclerc’s military situation grew increasingly perilous during the summer. Ravaged by yellow fever, his European army had shrunk to an effective force of 5,000 demoralized survivors by September.³¹ Reinforcements poured in from France, but these were often less committed troops (such as reluctant Polish allies) selected due to the terrible attrition rate.

Losses to disease and guerrilla warfare forced Leclerc to rely increasingly on officers and troops from Louverture's former colonial army, who as long-time inhabitants of the colony were immune to yellow fever and knew Saint-Domingue's terrain well. Their assistance averted an immediate military disaster, but as time passed Leclerc began to doubt their loyalty and grew convinced that they were simply biding their time until an opportunity arose to change sides.³²

Leclerc also faced a crisis of a more personal nature. Convinced that, like much of the rest of his army, he would eventually die of yellow fever, he turned into a despondent, hypochondriac recluse.³³ He felt abandoned by Bonaparte, who had failed to provide him with the troops and finances he had promised.³⁴ He learned that his wife Pauline Bonaparte had an affair with one of his generals.³⁵ By October, he was on the verge of a mental breakdown. 'Ever since I arrived here, all I saw were fires, insurrections, murders, the dead and the dying', he wrote Bonaparte. 'My soul is wilted'.³⁶

It is in this difficult military and personal context that Leclerc first embraced a comprehensive program of mass executions. One can attribute his decision to his unstable state of mind, but it was also the logical culmination of months of increasing counterinsurgency violence and he presented his decision as the only means of achieving victory. On 17 September, he explained that he would have to 'wage a war of extermination' against the cultivators who, 'having become accustomed to banditry over the past ten years, will never agree to work'.³⁷ Three weeks later, he extended his plans to the entire adult black population of rural Saint-Domingue. 'We must destroy all the negroes in the mountains, men and women, keeping only infants less than twelve-years-old', he wrote Bonaparte. 'We must also destroy half of those of the plain and leave in the colony not a single man of color [i.e., black or mixed-race] who has worn an epaulet. Without this the colony will never be quiet'.³⁸ Though aimed at the black and mixed-race population, the policy had a social as well as a racial agenda: to bring a final end to labour unrest in the colony. The 'negroes in the mountains', for example, was a reference to the runaway field labourers opposed to plantation agriculture and who had been at the forefront of many uprisings in previous years.

Because Leclerc had lost control of the colony's interior, colonial units under direct French control, more than rebels entrenched in hard-to-reach rural areas, suffered the brunt of his policies. As doubts regarding their loyalty spread in September, it became standard practice to punish an entire unit when one of its members had tried to defect.³⁹ The new guidelines meant an exponential growth in the number of victims, who had to be executed on a quasi-industrial scale. Shooting and hanging were not up to the task. On 29 August, a first batch of 80 prisoners was drowned in the bay of Cap-Français, and mass drowning subsequently became the preferred way to dispose of hundreds of victims at once (see Figure 1).⁴⁰ According to early Haitian works, sulphur was also used to gas prisoners inside the ships themselves. The claim may be true since a British agent reported that prisoners had been 'smothered' on board ships to dispose of them without giving them a chance to put their courage on display in a public execution.⁴¹

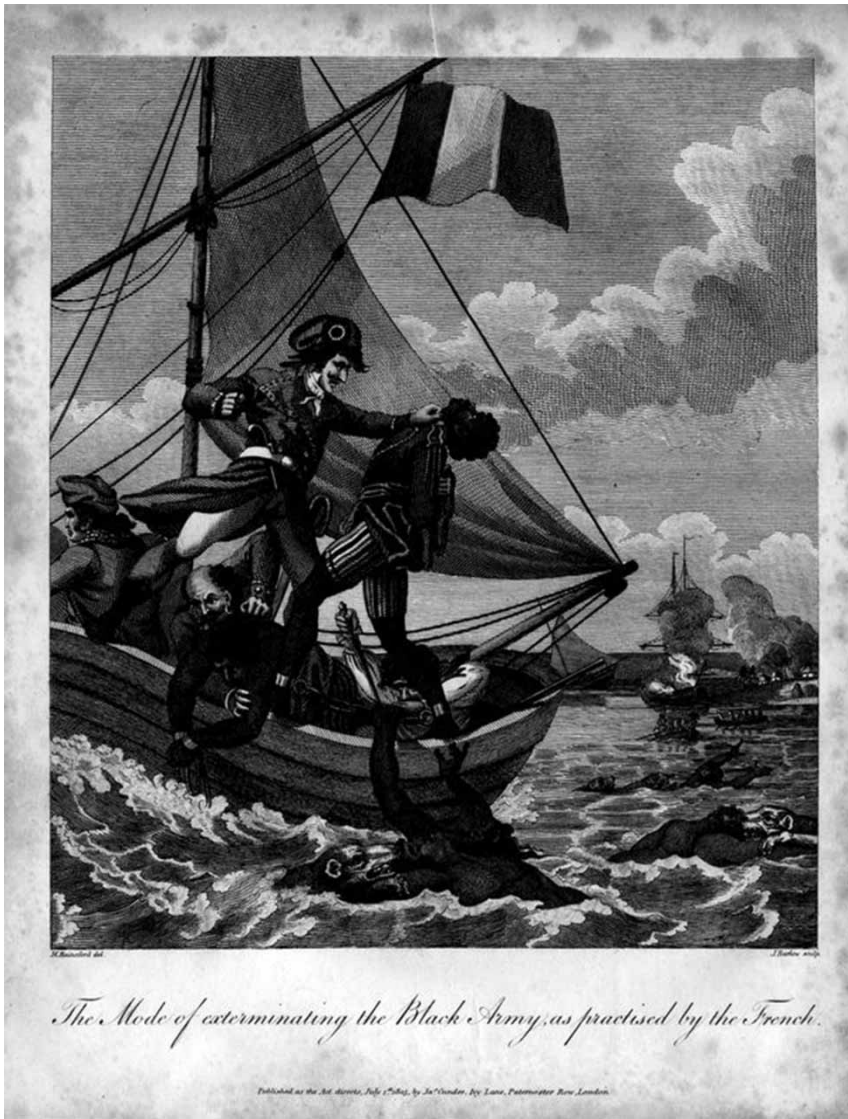


Figure 1. J. Barlow, ‘The mode of exterminating the black army as practiced by the French’, in Marcus Rainsford, *A historical account of the black empire of Hayti* (London: Albion Press, 1805), p. 327. This frequently reproduced illustration conflates the two most famous crimes of the French army during the Haitian war of independence: mass drowning and the use of man-eating dogs. Both atrocities are independently documented, but at different epochs: the Leclerc era (mass drowning peaked in October 1802) and the Rochambeau era (man-hunting dogs were first employed in March 1803). The author of the book, who claimed to have briefly visited Saint-Domingue in 1799, probably did not personally witness the events depicted here. His stay in Saint-Domingue even dated back to 1797–1798 according to Marcus Rainsford, Paul Youngquist and Grégory Pierrot (eds.), *Marcus Rainsford: An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* (1805; reprint, Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), xxxiv.

The chemical method furnished Ribbe with handy ammunition in his effort to compare Bonaparte with Adolf Hitler, but it is a coincidence, not causal link; one can only note that two regimes employed a similar method of mass murder because it was efficient and discreet. The parallels between the mass drowning perpetrated by the French army in Saint-Domingue and those of their revolutionary colleagues in 1793 Nantes were more evident to contemporaries, who often compared Leclerc to a latter-day Jean-Baptiste Carrier.⁴² In addition to the guillotine, revolutionary France had also developed machines designed to suffocate victims.⁴³ In 1802 as in 1793, the French army used mass execution to eradicate an enemy class; the main difference was that the French army was now fighting radical cultivators rather than monarchist peasants. Another parallel was not mentioned by Dominguan rebels for obvious political reasons: they too had employed drowning in the past, particularly during the War of the South (1799–1800) that had pitted Toussaint Louverture against a mixed-race rival.⁴⁴

Meant to reduce desertion rates in colonial units, mass executions proved counterproductive. Hesitant officers and troops defected for fear of being killed. In October 1802, most prominent officers of color joined the rebel ranks, often citing French atrocities as their primary motive to defect.⁴⁵

In a state of panic as Cap-Français was encircled by rebel leaders, Leclerc ordered 1,200 troops from the 6th colonial demi-brigade drowned in the harbour, the largest single massacre to take place during the expedition.⁴⁶ He also asked other garrisons throughout the colony to execute soldiers of color or to ship them to Cap-Français to be drowned. Leclerc died suddenly of yellow fever on 2 November, but not before entire units like the 9th colonial demi-brigade had also been drowned.⁴⁷ The colonial prefect Hector Daure, who briefly took over after Leclerc's death, also saw to it that his last orders were implemented in places like Santo Domingo (present-day Dominican Republic).⁴⁸

Leclerc seldom employed racially charged terms at first, possibly because so-called scientific racism, commonplace in the Caribbean, remained a new concept among popular classes in France; he was even accused of 'négrophilisme'.⁴⁹ But the last weeks of Leclerc's tenure, when he targeted all colonial units regardless of their individual record, gave the expedition a distinct racial overtone. 'War has become very simplified, it pits whites against blacks', an admiral explained to a captain. 'I took measures to ensure that prisoners no longer bother us and I encourage you to do the same'.⁵⁰

The reasons for this switch must be found in Cap-Français, not Paris. No reference to a war of racial extermination appears in the letters sent by Bonaparte; instead, he merely repeated his earlier instructions that Leclerc should deport leading colonial officers to France.⁵¹ When rumours about large-scale massacres reached France in 1803, the minister of the navy and colonies wrote back to complain that the expeditionary army was destroying Saint-Domingue's valuable population and reiterated the first consul's preference for targeted deportations.⁵²

Even within the French officer corps in Saint-Domingue, disagreement raged over the new racial tone of the war. In western, southern and eastern Saint-Domingue, where the rebellion had not yet reached a worrisome level, local

commanders generally resisted calls for the extermination of colonial troops and people of color continued to form a majority of French contingents.⁵³ Some naval officers refused to drown people of color, especially when some bond (such as freemasonry) tied them to potential victims.⁵⁴ Other French officers proved all too eager to execute specific officers of color, but for financial rather than racial motives as it gave them an excuse to seize their estate.⁵⁵ The use of racial rhetoric to hide monetary goals would remain a feature of the conflict until its very end and add further evidence that French atrocities were a locally designed phenomenon that emerged in response to a variety of individual motives.

Rochambeau and colonial violence (November 1802–November 1803)

Donatien de Rochambeau took over as captain-general of the expeditionary army in November 1802. He is usually remembered, by contrast with Leclerc, as the epitome of the racist, cruel French imperial agent.⁵⁶

The historical record only partly warrants Rochambeau's reputation. Shortly after taking over, he did express his intention to 'destroy, or deport, black or mulatto generals, officers, soldiers and planters, in totality' and later added that to ensure a lasting peace the colony would have to 'molt' [*faire peau neuve*], an expression that according to his chief of staff meant the death of 'all negroes, negresses and men and women of color above the age of ten'.⁵⁷ But Rochambeau was less proactive than his predecessor in putting such policies into action. A list of prisoners 'embarked' (drowned) during a five-day period in Cap-Français in December 1802 included twenty-six names, each of them accompanied by a description of their crime, whereas in October Leclerc had ordered thousands of people executed en masse without any need for individual guilt.⁵⁸ A constant stream of targeted executions aimed at political or economic rivals—wealthy officers of color in particular—rather than the large-scale massacres of black troops of the late Leclerc era, characterized Rochambeau's twelve-month tenure.

More than the sheer number of his victims, Rochambeau's reputation stems from the manner in which they were put to death. The modes of execution used under Leclerc, particularly shooting and hanging, were considered relatively humane in their time. To these, Rochambeau added an arsenal of tortures for which a new vocabulary had to be designed. To 'rise in dignity' was to be crucified. To die in a 'hot operation' was to burn at the stake. To 'descend into the arena' was to be devoured by dogs.⁵⁹

Evidence for the first mode of execution, crucifixion, remains sparse, since we only know of a single incident mentioned by one early Haitian historian.⁶⁰ A similar episode, related as fact to the present time, involved the black general Jacques Maurepas, whose epaulets and hat were allegedly nailed into his body, but its veracity is questionable since the first account to that effect only appeared in 1814, followed by a fuller 1847 version that included a scourging scene to reinforce the Christian analogy.⁶¹ Contemporary accounts only mention that Maurepas was drowned with some family members.⁶² Many other atrocities,

however, are historical fact. One case of burning at the stake is mentioned in several eyewitness accounts.⁶³ The use of dogs to flush out rebels from the woods during military operations, but also to devour rebels in makeshift arenas, is even better documented.⁶⁴

Jean-Clément Martin has argued that there is no need to draw fine theoretical distinctions between French revolutionary violence and its predecessors. 'By coupling the modernity of war with the permanence of ritual violence, French 'barbarism' finds a logical explanation'.⁶⁵ But contemporary observers in Saint-Domingue saw sharp differences between the isolated massacres of the spring of 1802 (a traditional, though regrettable, side effect of war), the mass drowning of the fall of 1802 (an extreme measure reminiscent of the Terror) and the cruel and unusual punishments employed by Rochambeau, which were a throwback to pre-revolutionary colonial mores. Burning at the stake had been the penalty inflicted to the rebel Makandal in 1758, while dogs had been used during the Spanish conquest of Hispaniola and Jamaica's Maroon War.

The switch probably reflected Rochambeau's Ancien Régime profile: he was a noble born in 1755 whose career had included extended stints in the pre-revolutionary colonial empire. It was also revealing of his reactionary politics. Contrary to Leclerc and Bonaparte, whose views on slavery were tortured and evolving, he was a firm supporter of slavery.⁶⁶ It was thus only logical that he would revive the exceptional tortures that had once been intended to frighten slaves into submission without killing a large segment of the labour force. Like many white planters, Rochambeau also disliked the *anciens libres* (elite free people of color) and the *petits blancs* (lower-class whites who often embraced a leftist agenda). The list of his victims was thus not limited to rural labourers and colonial soldiers, as had been the case under Leclerc. Of the twenty-six people drowned in Cap-Français in December 1802, eleven of the victims were black, three white and twelve mixed-raced *mulâtres*.⁶⁷

Then as before, French atrocities were designed at the local level. 'Maybe my ideas are not popular in France and the government finds them too extreme', Rochambeau explained to the minister of the navy. 'But I am on the scene, I am used to this horrid colony and my plan is the only one that can take it safely to port'.⁶⁸ Bonaparte, whose interest in the colony's affairs ebbed markedly after he concluded in early 1803 that the expedition was doomed to failure, did not directly respond to Rochambeau's various suggestions, especially after the resumption of the war with England made it difficult to send instructions to the colony. But he was displeased with Rochambeau's overall record as captain general of Saint-Domingue, which in addition to atrocities included corruption, sexual depravity, judicial arbitrariness and ultimately defeat.⁶⁹

The evolving nature of the documentary record is another indication of French attitudes toward the types of violence used in the expedition. Shooting and hanging rebels was mentioned repeatedly, often with pride, in the day-to-day military records kept in the French army archives in Vincennes, clearly because French officers saw such methods as acceptable, even laudable. Orders for mass drowning sent in the fall of 1802 were sent in writing from Cap-Français to

individual officers, but they were often accompanied by justifications because they were extreme measures justified by extraordinary circumstances; aside from Leclerc's general comments about the need for a war of extermination, details were not passed on to Paris and six months later the minister of the navy was still asking whether there was any truth to rumours of mass drowning.⁷⁰ The more barbaric methods employed at a later stage were not normally mentioned in the correspondence of French officers within the colony and never to metropolitan authorities. We only know of these atrocities through non-official channels such as contemporary letters by rebel and British critics, later memoirs by French civilians and officers and oral traditions collected by early Haitian historians. The reason for this silence was that the atrocities were seen as 'unworthy of the French name, even though the victims were only negroes', to cite a French veteran.⁷¹ 'My pen cannot relate such horrifying crimes', also wrote a planter.⁷²

British naval blockades and the growing assertiveness of the rebel army on land meant that by the summer of 1803 Rochambeau could not even contact his own subordinates in besieged ports. Atrocities in such isolated towns, consequently, were the result of each general's idiosyncrasies. The most notorious of these local commanders, Louis d'Arbois in Jérémie, was a noble veteran of the Bourbon army and shared Rochambeau's political and social profile. This may explain the similarity of his crimes—which included burning—and the fact that they particularly affected mixed-race *anciens libres*. As with Rochambeau, political and economic motives were paramount since victims were often prosperous planters whose estate d'Arbois promptly appropriated.⁷³

Rochambeau's measures proved as counterproductive as Leclerc's. The gruesome spectacle of daily executions worsened civilian and army morale inside French towns and put him at odds with the more liberal members of his army, who went as far as plotting Rochambeau's overthrow.⁷⁴ They also cost Rochambeau the support of the elite *anciens libres*. Many had remained on France's side after the mass defections of October 1802, but French atrocities convinced them to join the rebellion when exactions against their party multiplied in early 1803. Even southern *mulâtres*, who had developed a deep-seated antipathy for the rebel leader Dessalines during the War of the South, eventually joined him after he accused the French of planning to exterminate the mixed-race population with 'forests of scaffolds'.⁷⁵ In typical fashion, the mixed-race general Nicolas Geffrard explained that he had switched sides because the French had 'trained dogs to drink the human blood of two or three of our brothers every day in Cap'.⁷⁶

French atrocities, by uniting the bulk of the population of color against French colonial rule, thus played a significant role in facilitating the rebel victory. It also incited the rebels to embrace independence because, Geffrard explained in September 1803, the French 'offered drowning, shootings and the gallows as gratitude for our constant affection and fidelity to the metropolis'.⁷⁷ French atrocities also featured prominently in Dessalines' 1804 declaration of independence, in which he called on fellow Haitians to kill surviving French civilians to avenge 'your wives, your husbands, your brothers, your sisters, even nursing children' who had fallen victim to the French 'vultures'.⁷⁸

As years elapsed, French atrocities continued to be mentioned in public events like the annual Independence Day festivities.⁷⁹ Haiti, an author explained, fully deserved to exist as a sovereign state because the French had employed such brutal methods as ‘chains, drowning, strangulation, suffocation, bloodhounds, shooting, hanging, sawing between two planks and burning’.⁸⁰ This list of French crimes can be found in virtually every historical work published in Haiti ever since and continues to be an integral part of Haitian historical memory to this day.

Conclusion

That the atrocities committed in 1802–1803 constitute a blot on the French imperial record is a fact rarely disputed today, whether in France or Haiti. That, contrary to some historians’ claims, they emerged locally in response to military setbacks rather than as part of a policy of extermination designed in Paris, only slightly mitigates the crime. But determining whether they rise to the level of genocide (as defined in 1944 by the term’s inventor, Raphaël Lemkin, and in the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide) is a thornier issue.

Responsibility—which under article 3 of the 1948 convention ranges from an actual attempt to commit genocide to incitement, complicity and conspiracy—is easiest to ascertain. Ribbe’s fanciful claims notwithstanding, Bonaparte made no call for the eradication of the population of color and even viewed such an enterprise as economically senseless. Leclerc and Rochambeau, by contrast, both expressed in writing their belief that a war of ‘extermination’ was necessary, while some of their subordinates, such as Pierre Boyer, were quite frank in assuming responsibility for their crimes.

To ‘destroy, in whole or in part’, a racial group is an important characteristic of genocide as defined by article 2 of the 1948 convention, but it is impossible to determine the number of people killed by the French with any precision. Census figures (which are grossly inadequate) suggest that Haiti’s population, which had neared 600,000 in 1789, was merely half that number at independence, and that 100,000 of these deaths took place during the Leclerc–Rochambeau expedition in 1802–1803.⁸¹ But there is no available tally that would distinguish between the people of color who died fighting for France and those who died fighting against it, those who died in combat and those who were massacred outright, or civilian and military deaths.

Assessing whether Leclerc and Rochambeau truly intended to eradicate Saint-Domingue’s population—article 2’s ‘intent’—is also difficult. Both wrote of exterminating all adult blacks, but such hyperbolic statements stood in direct contradiction with their actions. Even in areas under their control, people of color continued to form a large segment of the population, both civilian and military, until the time of the French evacuation.

That the perpetrators of the atrocities were defeated further complicates any attempt to gauge whether they would have acted on their threats. Runaway

cultivators and rebel colonial units—the most likely candidates for a war of extermination designed to pacify the colony—were also the most difficult to kill as long as the French were militarily weak. For the French to extend their unchallenged authority over all of Saint-Domingue would have allowed them to massacre all the rebels but it would also have eliminated much of the military rationale for doing so. In the former case, the French could not kill their rivals; in the latter, they did not need to. Well aware of the contradiction, the British governor of Jamaica concluded that only a lengthy, even-matched conflict would have resulted in the outcome he thought best suited for England's interests: the 'utter destruction' of Saint-Domingue.⁸² In the end, the most likely estimate of losses in the event of a French victory should be based on the example of Guadeloupe, where ten per cent of the population was killed or deported after 1802 to facilitate the restoration of slavery, possibly not enough to warrant the 'in whole or in part' standard.⁸³

Determining whether members of the Leclerc-Rochambeau expedition selected their victims primarily on racial grounds—the last element of genocide's definition—is by far the most complicated issue to resolve. One can identify a plurality of motives, which varied with time and the persons involved, and included knee-jerk acts of vengeance, wilful attempts to spread terror among cultivators refusing to go back to work, industrial-scale massacres of colonial units suspected of disloyalty, extremist orders issued by a mentally distressed Leclerc, crass murders to appropriate a planter's wealth and horrific tortures inspired by pre-revolutionary mores and designed, in some cases, to entertain Rochambeau's clique. This diversity of motives makes the use of the term 'genocide' problematic.

The most incriminating document was the letter in which Leclerc advocated a war of extermination against 'negroes', which was followed by several episodes of mass drowning. But the term did not necessarily mean that he thought of the conflict primarily as a racial one, since in Saint-Domingue the word was used as a generic descriptor for groups that happened to be black but whose primary characteristic was social (such as maroons, rebel cultivators, or the colonial army). Revealingly, Leclerc immediately proceeded to distinguish between 'negroes of the mountain' (runaways), 'those of the plains' (cultivators) and 'people of color who have worn an epaulet' (officers in the colonial army, some of them mixed-race).⁸⁴ He did not expect that the extermination of his enemies would bring about the racial purification of the colony, since Africans would have been imported to replenish the labour force. Instead, he hoped to secure long-term stability by eliminating groups fundamentally hostile to the colonial system. One could write of an attempted genocide aimed at political enemies (as in the Ukraine in the 1920s and Cambodia in the 1970s) if Joseph Stalin had not lobbied to keep the category of politicide absent from the 1948 UN convention.

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