

self-ruling and independent of all human powers. At the same time, simple good sense, accepting these principles, adds that it is absurd and crazy that a people be governed by laws coming from a lawmaker two thousand leagues away. The inhabitants of our colonies have committed one folly, which is to have agreed to send representatives to the French National Assembly. But this foolishness was the work of the white colonists alone. And yet in fact everyone has the right to free themselves from the yoke of the metropole, to choose another ruler for themselves, or to establish themselves as a republic; and why not? Since the supremacy that France claimed over them was wrongfully taken, based on tyrannical principles and only exercised by virtue of France's superior strength. To go farther, what if the residents of our colonies had declared their independence, how would we dare disapprove that they followed the example of the English colonies? By what bizarre inconsistency would we criticize in them what we approved so strongly among the [North American] rebels? From the complete right of our colonies to free themselves from the metropole, do not conclude that I am trying to support the cause of the white colonists: In my opinion they cannot be forgiven for trying to set themselves up as the despotic masters of the mulattos and the tyrannical masters of the blacks. If the laws of nature precede those of society and if the rights of man are inalienable, then whatever complaints the white colonists have against the French nation, the mulattos and the blacks have against the white colonists. To bring down the cruel and shameful yoke that oppresses them, they have the right to use all possible means, even death, should they be forced to massacre their oppressors to the last man.

These are the principles that would guide an equitable lawmaker in the question of Saint-Domingue: This is to say that the recent decree about the [free] men of color is fair and that on the *nègres* is appalling. But how would we be able to treat men with black skins as free beings, when in fact [in France] we have not treated men paying less than a crown in taxes as citizens? We boast of our philosophy and our liberty; but today we are as enslaved by our prejudices and our elected officials as we were ten centuries ago.

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THOMAS CLARKSON

The True State of the Case, Respecting the Insurrection at St. Domingo

1792

Many commentators, particularly Saint-Domingue planters, claimed that the slave insurrection in the colony had been incited, either directly or indirectly, by abolitionists. Some actually claimed that the emissaries from antislavery groups were working with the insurgents, but more common was the assertion that attacks on slavery in Europe had convinced slaves that they had allies who would support them if they rebelled. In this 1792 pamphlet, the leading British abolitionist, Thomas Clarkson, who had extensive contacts with abolitionists and activist free people of color in Paris, sought to refute this idea. It was the barbarity of slavery itself, he asserted, that was the cause of the insurrection.

It is impossible for any one to have read the history of Greece and Rome with attention, without knowing that there were many and bloody insurrections of slaves in the countries which their Histories respectively comprehend.—Now it is impossible to attribute these with any propriety to persons associated either for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, or personal slavery; because, it does not appear from History, that there ever were associations in those days for so laudable a purpose.

Whoever, again, has read the History of the West India Islands from their first establishment to the year 1786, must have read it very superficially, not to know, that there have been various insurrections of slaves there, within this period. There was formerly a bloody one at St. Domingo, besides that which has lately happened. There have been several in Jamaica, and other Islands have had their share of them also.

Thomas Clarkson, *The true state of the case, respecting the insurrection at St. Domingo* (London, 1792).

Now, it is impossible that any of these could have had their origin in the efforts of the Gentlemen associated for the Abolition; because it was not till 1787, that the first Committee was formed, which was in London, for the Abolition of this execrable Trade.

To what cause then may we attribute the insurrections in the Islands? Undoubtedly to the Slave Trade, in consequence of which thousands are annually poured into the Islands, who have been fraudulently and forcibly deprived of the Rights of Men. All these come into them, of course, with dissatisfied and exasperated minds; and this discontent and feeling of resentment must be farther heightened by the treatment which people coming into them under such a situation must unavoidably receive; for we cannot keep people in a state of subjection to us, who acknowledge no obligation whatever to serve us, but by breaking their spirits and treating them as creatures of another species. Now, that this is the cause is evident from Mr. Long, the celebrated champion of the Planters themselves, who states in his *History of Jamaica*, that all the Insurrections of the Slaves that he could ever trace in the Islands, were begun by the imported Africans, and never by the Creole, or island-born, Slaves. . . .

As, however, the present insurrection in St. Domingo is somewhat connected with the late Revolution in France, it may be necessary to say a few words upon it as relative to that event. . . . Here then we see no less than three factions prevalent at the same moment in St. Domingo. The Whites divided into two parties; and the White and People of Colour burning with a fury hardly satiable by the extirpation of one another. What then did the negroes do at this interesting moment? Seeing their Lords and Masters not able to agree among themselves, but at daggers drawn with one another, they determined to take advantage of the divisions among them, and to assert their violated rights by force of arms.—Such is the true state of the case respecting the Insurrection at St. Domingo, and what do we learn from it but the following truth? “That the slave trade, and the oppression naturally resulting from it, was the real and only cause of this Insurrection,” as it ever has been, and ever will be, of similar events; but that the Revolution of France, by causing the three divisions before mentioned, did afford the Negroes an opportunity which they would otherwise not so easily have found, of endeavoring to vindicate for themselves the unalterable Rights of Man.

The above accounts then lead us to three separate conclusions: First, That the Slave Trade is the real cause of all West Indian Insurrections.—Secondly, that as long as it exists, so long may these Insurrec-

tions be expected.—And Thirdly, That the St. Domingo Insurrection, in particular, so far from affording us a just argument (as the Planters say) to discontinue our exertions at the present moment, calls upon us to redouble them, if we have any value for our own islands, or any wish that the present Proprietors of them may preserve their estates to themselves, and perpetuate them to their posterity.

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THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

Law of April 4

1792

In fall 1791, French voters selected a new legislature, which by law contained no members of the first National Assembly. Horrified by news of the slave uprising of August 1791, the outgoing Assembly had rescinded its controversial May 15, 1791, decree. But on March 28, 1792, the new legislators passed the following decree, which was signed by the king on April 4, 1792, and thereafter was known as the Law of April 4.

The National Assembly, in view of the fact that the enemies of the public have used the minor disagreements that have developed in the colonies to maintain their own power by raising the slaves in revolt, disrupting the forces of order, and dividing the citizens, whose unified effort is the only thing that can save their property from the horrors of fire and pillage;

That this odious plot appears to be part of conspiracies that have been hatched against the French nation and that have occurred simultaneously in the both hemispheres;

In view of the Assembly's hope that the love all colonists have for their fatherland will allow them forget the causes of their conflicts and the various wrongs done to all sides as a consequence, and that they