

Haiti misconceived: Misreading Toussaint's capture .

By O A Ladimeji

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There is a standard interpretation of the capture of Toussaint L'Ouverture which involves the old wily fox, veteran of endless campaigns against French, Spanish and British forces, being openly tricked by the French General Leclerc despite numerous explicit warnings. Yet this story simply does not add up.

One is reminded of the way Black Americans vastly underestimated the philosophical skills of George Jackson. I have always assumed that this was because being not well educated themselves they saw George Jackson as a 'poorly educated brother' like themselves. Jean Genet and Michel Foucault however had no such misconceptions. George Jackson is probably the most influential US philosopher of 20th Century despite lack of general acknowledgement.

CLR James, brilliant writer and marxist theoreticians, lacked any strategic military skills himself and interpreted Toussaint's behaviour through the lens of a 'fighting Black man' and that of Trotskyism. Nowhere in his book does James ever face or comprehend the strategic military complexes that Toussaint had to decode. It is as if James believes that mere ardour and élan could win wars - in this regards James shows no understanding of Napoleon's military genius or the issues facing Toussaint in defeating Napoleon.

James' Trotskyism leads him elsewhere into strange territory such as treating plantation slavery as a step forward in civilisation for African slaves:

'The sugar plantation has been the most civilising as well as the most demoralising influence in West Indian development. When three centuries ago the slaves came to the West Indies, they entered directly into the large-scale agriculture of the sugar plantation, which was a modern system'. (Note 1) Or that the ideas of the French Revolution would have been prime motivators for illiterate slaves in Haiti but nowhere else. Such an analysis would make no sense of the maroonage in Jamaica or the slave revolts in Bahia, Brazil. 'During the first half of the nineteenth century, Bahia, an area of Brazil known for its many sugar plantations, experienced a wave of slave revolts and conspiracies that profoundly marked the consciousness of those who lived in this period as well as their descendants. Throughout Brazil, Bahian slaves stood as a bad example to the slave class in the eyes of the protectors and beneficiaries of the slave order. Collective slave resistance had occurred before in the region, but slaves had never demonstrated such militancy as between 1807 and 1835. ' (Note 2).

Perhaps more to the point is that James' interpretation of Toussaint as the first free maroon state is simply incorrect as that title goes to Palmares in Bahia, Brazil founded in 1605. (Note 3) This is not mere historical curiosity as the claim of Haiti to be the first free maroon state plays a major role in marxist periodisation and is crucial in linking the revolt to the French

Revolution. If such revolts were happening elsewhere long before the French Revolution then that link is largely broken.

If one were looking for triggers for the Haitian revolution the fantastic increase in the rate of exploitation could be a clue.

“By the 1780s, nearly 40 percent of all the sugar imported by Britain and France and 60 percent of the world’s coffee came from the small colony. For a brief time, Saint-Domingue annually produced more exportable wealth than all of continental North America. “ (Note 4)

What are the key issues with the standard interpretation?

1. There is no evidence that Toussaint was at all surprised by the turn of events
2. Toussaint rather than being concerned about the future was triumphant that the future had been secured.
3. This standard interpretation does not account for the effect of Toussaint’s capture which should have been according to their terms demoralisation. Instead as Martin Ros states’ ‘Toussaint was never to receive the news that would have eased his last days so greatly; namely, that all the blacks as well as all the mulattoes, all the former slaves and all the free blacks were finally marching triumphantly against the French in an alliance that could no longer be defeated’ (Note 5).

A for more important failing of the standard interpretation is that NO ONE ever looks at the strategic situation facing Toussaint. Knowing the final outcome they skip over the strategic crisis facing Toussaint. Another failing of the standard interpretation is that it does not explain the timing of events as Toussaint’s change of approach happened when his troops were in an advantageous military situation. What caused such hesitation?

In order to understand Toussaint’s actions we need to consider the strategic situation:

- a. On his side there was considerable war weariness
- b. Napoleon’s line of attack was both military and political. Napoleon sought to divide free whites from Blacks , mulattoes from Blacks , war weary from hard fighters by offering conciliatory terms. Toussaint had an extensive spy network and was fully aware of most of Napoleon’s plans and tactics. One author suggested that Toussaint was aware of Napoleon’s orders before they reached his local generals in Haiti.
- c. Toussaint’s health was declining. ‘Toussaint was not well...’ (Note 6)
- d. Toussaint was using biological warfare extensively and was fully aware of the success of the spread of yellow fever among the French troops. ‘Through his spies, Toussaint was extremely well informed about the way yellow fever was spreading through the cities. He was heard to remark, in fact, that the French army was already being defeated without the need for anyone to take up arms.’ (Note 7) Dessalines told his troops: ‘Take courage, I tell you, take courage. The French will not be able to remain long in San Domingo. They will do well at first, but soon they will fall ill and die like flies.’ (Note 8 CLRJ p. 314) ‘in the eight weeks of February and March 17,000 French veterans had landed,

5,000 were in hospital, 5,000 were dead, “ (Note 9)

To start with the issue of Toussaint's health. One of the factors he would have to consider if there was to be a final struggle would be the effect of his poor health and the impact of his death on the morale of the troops. Commentators talk of the rigours of the dungeon but this does not make sense. The rigours of extensive guerilla warfare would be harsher than that of a dungeon. In Sept 29 1802 Toussaint wrote of his health 'being seriously damaged' (Note 10). It would be reasonable to conclude that Toussaint did not consider himself fit and well enough to lead the next war to a conclusion.

Both James and Ros emphasise the extensive war weariness among Toussaint's generals. Leclerc, in a disastrous tactical position, decided to begin making conciliatory offers to Toussaint's generals and succeeds in separating Christophe from the war team. 'When Toussaint and the others reproached him, Christophe, a man known to appreciate the comforts of life, replied that he was tired of living in the woods like a brigand.' (Note 11) This situation is not strategically far from that faced by Lenin in 1917 with war weariness of the Russian people which led to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

If Leclerc could entrap Christophe it was possible that many others could follow and the military advantage would evaporate. Toussaint would need to act swiftly and did.

It should now be clear that the strategic position faced by Toussaint was that the success of any war against the French would be entirely dependent on the unity of forces. However that unity of forces could only be brought about by some action that would render Leclerc's credibility and any future offers totally unacceptable. This was a chess board, and it was Toussaint's move. Leclerc's move was desperate, clever and potentially disastrous for the Haitian revolution. Toussaint needed to make a move that would render Leclerc tactically impotent and for that he would need to entrap Leclerc to implicate himself.

It is in this context that one has to see Toussaint's move to sacrifice a knight (himself) to bring about check mate.

As Ros writes: "Toussaint's reaction was 'Have you seen this, all of you who keep saying that they want to arrest me?... On June 7, Toussaint set out for the Georges plantation together with Placidus and Cesar, his adjutant. On the way there, a white woman threw herself in front of Toussaint's horse and begged him to turn back. The French were encamped all around the Georges plantation, and when they saw Toussaint, they smirked at each other and did not salute him.'(Note 12)

Had Napoleon been there matters might have been different. Napoleon who had used such misdirection himself with great success at critical moments might have smelt a rat. All the signs of misdirection were present. Toussaint however was relying on the French racism to blind them

to that possibility. Similarly, the French never gave any serious consideration to the possibility of being victims of biological warfare despite the fact that Europeans had been using such tactics extensively against the Caribbean natives. Racism would enure them against any suspicion, even when the evidence was palpably in front of them.

What was the effect of the arrest of Toussaint?

As Ros stated... '...all the blacks as well as all the mulattoes, all the former slaves and all the free blacks were finally marching triumphantly against the French in an alliance that could no longer be defeated' (Note 13)

'The news of Toussaint's arrest came like a cold shock to the whole population. Whatever Toussaint had done, he stood for liberty. Round about Ennery and in the mountains the drums were beating and calling the people to revolt, and in the heights of Plaisance, Dondon, and around, the mass insurrection against Leclerc began.' (Note 14)

'The insurrection was spreading daily in the North and at the call for arms it doubled there and spread to South and West. Derance, Samedi Smith, Jean Panier, and other nameless petty chieftains. North, South and West, each in his own district summoned the blacks to revolt' (Note 15)

'But the insurrection grew always, and while it grew the fever took its toll. The French could bury their dead in formal fashion no longer, but threw them into huge holes at night, lest the blacks should see how the army was wasting away. As if that could hide it. Leclerc, his health broken, went to Tortuga to recuperate. Feeling better, he left the island to come back to Le Cap. As soon as he left an insurrection burst behind him. It was crushed there. only to break out among the blacks around Mole St Nicholas. In early July the rumours began to spread through the island that the French Government was restoring slavery. ' (Note 16)

Not only did a general insurrection start but there was a growing unity between Black, Mulattoes and rebellious whites against the French. *Toussaint had successfully check mated Napoleon and Gen Leclerc.*

NOTES

1. Black Jacobins: by CLR James 1989 (CLRJ) p. 392
2. 'Slave Resistance in Brazil: Bahia 1807-1835' by Joao Jose Reis , Luso -Brazilian Review 1988 vol 25 no.1
3. 'The Quilombo of Palmares: A New Overview of a Maroon State in Seventeenth-Century' by Robert Anderson Nelson - Journal of Latin American Studies 1996 vol 28 no.3
4. <http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/History/Haiti-history.htm>
5. 'Night of Fire' by Martin Ros 1994 Sarpedon (Ros) p.204
6. CLRJ p.333
7. Ros p.180
8. CLRJ p. 314
9. CLRJ p.323
10. Ros p.208
11. CLRJ p.326
12. Ros p.184
13. Ros p.204
14. CLRJ p.334
15. CLRJ p.337
16. CLRJ p.339

