

The 1811 African Slave Revolt in Louisiana

Re-examinations of the resistance to bondage reveal consciousness and organization

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Global Research, February 03, 2015

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [History](#)

An often hidden and misrepresented rebellion against slavery in 1811 along the German coast in Louisiana is now noted by some writers as the largest African uprising during the antebellum period.

Historiographical accounts of resistance to slavery among Africans in North America have undergone numerous revisions. Early 20th century accounts of the slave period were crafted for academia by southern historians who were sympathetic to the planters and business interests that dominated the region.

White professors such as Ulrich B. Phillips, a southerner who taught at the University of Michigan during the opening decades of the previous century, claimed that the southern slave system was paternal with largely benign coercive methods to ensure production quotas. Phillips attributes acts of resistance as criminal activity refusing to acknowledge the humanity of the enslaved Africans.

However, African and white progressive historians have sought to unravel the recurrent rebellions and other forms of resistance against enslavement and national oppression. Rather than being framed as an aberration within the slave system, the consistent forms of resistance to bondage suggests this factor played a significant role in shaping the character of the repressive mechanism utilized for the maintenance of the exploitative system.

For example, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was implemented at the beginning of the decade which saw the economic decline of plantation system. The increasing intransigent positions of the southern planters were in part a response to the economic and political crisis of the period where resistance to slavery grew substantially.

Origins of the 1811 Slave Revolt in Louisiana

A re-examination of historical documents related to the rebellion along the German coast point to the high degree of organization and discipline exercised by the African leaders who were brought to the area from Haiti and the region now known as Ghana in West Africa. The United States had acquired large swaths of territory in 1803 as a direct result of the collapse of French colonialism and slavery in Haiti, known as the Louisiana Purchase.

Africans in Haiti rose up against slavery in August 1791 and continued their struggle for over twelve years defeating not only the French but also the interventions of Spain and Britain. The formation of an African Republic in Haiti in 1804 sent shockwaves through the antebellum South.

Enslaved Africans in the South were aware of the Haitian Revolution and consequently sought avenues of escape and revolt against the plantation system. Recent accounts of the Louisiana rebellion of 1811 indicate that those involved in the planning of the break with the slave system were conscious of developments in Haiti as well as the ongoing struggle between Spain and U.S. over control of Florida.

Previous accounts of the 1811 rebellion based on newspaper reports of the period claimed that the actions of the Africans were unfocused and disorganized. However, a study conducted by Daniel Rasmussen entitled “American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt”, looks deeper into the court records during the prosecution of the African uprising leaders and also the timing of the resistance effort which was aimed at the seizure of New Orleans and the establishment of an independent republic.

A review of Rasmussen’s book published by Wendell Hassan Marsh, says that “The author situates the events in larger, international political and intellectual currents, revealing the sophistication of his subjects that many histories of slave rebels fail to portray. By the author’s account, the 1804 Haitian revolution victory inspired slaves around the colonies to rebel.” (The Root, Feb. 25, 2011)

This same review continues noting “The timing of the revolt — when there was little work and the white elites were preparing for Carnival celebrations, paired with the absence of a significant force of order because of American expansionism in Spanish West Florida — speaks to the slaves’ political and organizational acumen.... A cosmopolitan black republicanism seems to have been ripe in the region at the time of the revolt. Maroon colonies in the bayou operated as effective bases from which rebels attacked in the years leading up to the German Coast uprising. Copies of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man were found in slave quarters. Battle-hardened warriors from Ghana and Angola also make an appearance in Rasmussen’s version, in which the rebels march in formation and in uniform with cavalry support, not simply to ‘give us free,’ as Cinqué asked, but to take control of New Orleans and establish a black state.”

Anywhere from 200-500 Africans participated in the rebellion. Most of them were armed with knives, axes and other domestic weapons, but some carried guns.

The revolt erupted on January 8 at the plantation of Manuel Andry in St. Charles Parish, some thirty-six miles south of New Orleans. A principal figure in the rebellion was Charles Deslondes, who had been brought to New Orleans from Haiti.

Deslondes worked as a slave driver on the Andry plantation and occupied a relatively privileged position within the system. Nonetheless, Deslondes utilized access to the plantation house to organize fellow enslaved Africans who severely wounded Manuel Andry and killed his son before further arming themselves and setting out on the route to New Orleans picking up recruits along the way.

The Africans burned down several plantations and sugar mills as they headed towards New Orleans along the Mississippi River. White slave owners and their families fled ahead of the approaching rebellion alerting the authorities.

A militia was organized along with a detachment of U.S. regular troops on the night of Jan. 9. They attacked the Africans at the Jacques Fortier plantation in St. Charles Parish, halting their advance towards New Orleans.

During the clashes between the Africans and the defenders of the plantation system, sixty-six fighters were killed and seventy-five others were captured.

Of the seventy-five Africans who were detained some twenty-five were prosecuted in a show-trial. After a one-day investigation, eighteen Africans were condemned to the death penalty and taken to the plantations of their masters where they were shot to death and decapitated.

The severed heads of the Africans were put on poles on the plantations in an effort to terrify others into submission. Some of the Africans who had escaped to Orleans Parish were captured and also put up for a putative trial.

They were tried by a tribunal consisting of a judge and a panel of slave holders. This important chapter in the history of African resistance to slavery is finally getting the historical attention it requires some two centuries after these events took place.

Contemporary Significance of African Resistance to Slavery

There are parallels between the suppression of not only the resistance to enslavement on the part of Africans by the U.S. ruling class but also the distortion of the actual historical accounts, with the present nationwide movement against racist police violence. The killing of African Americans in the streets of the U.S. is provided with legal rationalizations under the guise of “justifiable homicide” or accidental deaths unattributed to law-enforcement actions.

When the youth in Ferguson rose up in rebellion in response to the brutal killing of Michael Brown, they faced condemnation from all quarters of the capitalist class from local officialdom right up to the White House. These acts of rebellion and mass demonstrations against state violence will continue until institutional racism and national oppression is uprooted in the U.S.

As the suppression of slave revolts throughout U.S. history cannot be justified, neither can the brutality used against the ongoing struggles against racism and national oppression in the U.S. Washington’s emphasis on “human rights” around the world rings hollow amid the atrocities being committed against African Americans which in most cases go unpunished and even rewarded by the state.

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