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Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts Of The Haitian Insurrection



Synopsis

The only truly successful slave uprising in the Atlantic world, the Haitian Revolution gave birth to the first independent black republic of the modern era. Inspired by the revolution that had recently roiled their French rulers, black slaves and people of mixed race alike rose up against their oppressors in a bloody insurrection that led to the burning of the colony's largest city, a bitter struggle against Napoleon's troops, and in 1804, the founding of a free nation. Numerous firsthand narratives of these events survived, but their invaluable insights into the period have long languished in obscurity—until now. In *Facing Racial Revolution*, Jeremy D. Popkin unearths these documents and presents excerpts from more than a dozen accounts written by white colonists trying to come to grips with a world that had suddenly disintegrated. These dramatic writings give us our most direct portrayal of the actions of the revolutionaries, vividly depicting encounters with the uprising's leaders—Toussaint Louverture, Boukman, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines—as well as putting faces on many of the anonymous participants in this epochal moment. Popkin's expert commentary on each selection provides the necessary background about the authors and the incidents they describe, while also addressing the complex question of the witnesses' reliability and urging the reader to consider the implications of the narrators' perspectives. Along with the American and French revolutions, the birth of Haiti helped shape the modern world. The powerful, moving, and sometimes troubling testimonies collected in *Facing Racial Revolution* significantly expand our understanding of this momentous event.

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Customer Reviews

“Jeremy Popkin’s collection of first-person narratives of the Haitian Revolution is an extremely valuable work, accessible, sound and intelligent. I only wish such a book had been available fifteen years ago when I was in the early stages of researching my series of novels. Popkin has been deft and tactful in stitching together these excerpts, and as a result, he manages to tell a complete version of the Revolution almost entirely in the words of the people who experienced it.” •this book engaged me deeply. (Madison Smartt Bell, author of *All Souls Rising* 2007-02-23)

“As anybody who has tried to teach, research, or write about the story of the Haitian Revolution knows, it is not easy. The memory is scrambled, local archives are in disarray, the relatively few records that survived, are dispersed. The events themselves are of a mind-boggling complexity and contextualizing sources can be very challenging. This is thus a much needed book. Weaving together translated documents and framing narratives into an easily readable, engaging text, it makes accessible one of the most important events in Atlantic history and the revolutionary age. Popkin’s book is equally useful for historians and literary scholars and will no doubt be indispensable for anybody who researches and teaches issues ranging from the revolutionary age and racial politics in the Americas to modern subject formation and violence and narration.” •Sibylle Fischer, author of *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Sibylle Fischer, author of *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery* 2007-11-07)

“Carefully researched and expertly presented, *Facing Racial Revolution* provides a series of often riveting accounts of Haiti’s revolutionary period. Most of these texts have never before been translated, and indeed many have been unknown even to many specialists until now. The texts represent a range of styles and political perspectives, providing much insight into the complexities of this period of rapid and profound social and political transformation. The book is not only an invaluable resource for scholars and teachers, but also an often moving window into the daily experiences of individuals caught up in the dramatic events of the Haitian revolution.” (Laurent M. Dubois, author of *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian* 2007-11-07)

“In this new and valuable anthology, historian Jeremy Popkin has done a great service to the profession, and undergraduate students in particular, by compiling a collection of mostly unpublished primary sources left by eyewitnesses. . . . This most welcome book is sure to be consulted regularly in the classroom and in broader scholarship.” (Karen Racine *Hispanic American Historical Review*)

“Popkin offers scholars a valuable text that complements much of the existing works on the Haitian Revolution. . . . The collection also offers remarkably detailed narratives that illustrate the battle tactics and efforts at diplomacy on the part of the

revolutionaries . . . and the massacres of the remaining whites in Haiti." (Walter Rucker Research in African Literatures)"The book, with its fascinating collection of personal narratives, helps to demonstrate and to explain the complexity and ambiguity of the Haitian Revolution." (William S. Cormack H-France Review)

Jeremy D. Popkin is the T. Marshall Hahn, Jr. Professor of History at the University of Kentucky. He is the author of several books, including *Revolutionary News: The Press in France, 1789-1799* and *History, Historians, and Autobiography*.

The author has compiled a comprehensive and fascinating set of first-person accounts of the Haitian Revolution. Even more interesting is the author's contribution by "setting of the scene" for each experience. You will thoroughly enjoy this book.

This book goes beyond what most historians try to pass on as original work. If you read enough books about Haiti common retelling of certain stories emerge and rarely even touch on the genocidal atrocities inflicted on the white inhabitants of Haiti. This masterpiece breaks down walls that were previously established to cover up the brutality that gripped a former French colony. I used parts of this book as references for a college paper and my professor dismissed this as fiction because it didn't fit the wonderful ideas that he had been taught about the Haitian revolution. The accounts you will read in this historical document are not for those with delicate sensibilities or weak stomachs.

This is one of the most exciting history books I have ever read. It feels so real and immediate, that one can't put it down. I started reading histories of Haiti's revolution as background to genealogical work, and Popkin's book got me hooked completely on this era of history (I have now read five or six other books about the Haitian revolution.). There are no surviving written texts by the slaves, yet if one reads Popkin's book carefully one can begin to understand, through the eyes of these first hand accounts, the dimensions of the twisted transformation of the Europeans who owned and managed slaves (the first chapter, *Becoming a Slavemaster*), and mistreated them so brutally, as well as the misdirected anger of the island's white non-slaveholders towards the island's successful free people of color (e.g., the incident in Jeremie). What a terrible time and place to have been a person of African descent. Popkin's translations, and the historical background he provides for each, together paint the horrors of slavery and racism in compelling, direct, and graphic terms. This book is for

anyone who loves to read and to think.

GREAT READ

This is a useful collection of primary sources on the Haitian Revolution, to be used in university classes on the topic. The big problem is that virtually all the documents selected were written by white planters, so the book is not very well balanced. The reader by Dubois and Garrigus was better done in that regard.

The book provides ample proof that the whites of St.Domingue were suicidally deluded and stupid. I found the author's comparison of the plight of the French colons to that of the Jews under the Nazis absurd and offensive. Mr. Popkin took liberties with the historical record when he tried to pass off the Saint Janvier story as factual.

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