

THE ROLE OF THE YELLOW FEVER IN THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

RESUMEN

En este artículo consideraremos varias cuestiones que se reunieron en la Revolución de Haití (1791-1804), que llevaría a la independencia de dicha república caribeña, como factores de naturaleza política, mediambientales y geográficas, además de la fiebre amarilla, considerada tradicionalmente como el element clave para la independencia haitiana.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Haití, revolución haitiana, fiebre amarilla.

ABSTRACT

In this article we will consider several issues that were brought together in the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), which would lead to the independence of said Caribbean republic, as factors of a political, environmental and geographical nature, in addition to yellow fever, traditionally considered as the key element for Haitian independence.

KEYWORDS

Haiti, Haitian Revolution, Yellow Fever.

generals and memoirists used yellow fever to explain the outcome of the war, creating a narrative which minimised their opponents' accomplishments (Kerversau, 1800, LeClerc, 1802). This narrative prevailed through history and was used to support scientific racism and eugenic ideas during the first half of twentieth century, most notably Stoddard (1914). In contrast, since the second half of the twentieth century, as a backlash from centuries of colonial ideas, the historiography of the Haitian Revolution has tended towards minimising the role of yellow fever. Environmental and geographical factors are separated from political ones, in an attempt to protect and support black achievement (James, 1963; Brewster, 1986). In this essay, I will propose a middle ground in line with McNeil (2010) and Geggus (1979). I will argue that both narratives - one attributing the results of the Haitian Revolution solely to the death tolls from yellow fever, and the other ignoring and separating its impact in order to protect black achievement - provide a skewed account of the Revolution. The first narrative ignores the active role that the French army played in the spread of the disease by undermining the slaves' insurrection and protecting economic and political interests over the health of their soldiers. The second does not account for the variety of ecological and social factors which influenced the impact of yellow fever on the Revolution, benefiting coincidentally and without knowledge black slaves.

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The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) in the colony of Saint Domingue, is the world's only successful slave insurrection, defeating both French and British empires. These revolts occurred at a time when European dominance was predicated on colonialism, racism and slavery. In that context, European

METHODOLOGY

For each narrative, I will first examine the context in which they emerge, the framing used and the argument they support. I will use secondary sources revisiting the conflict, emphasising the primary sources they use, for that initial evaluation. I will then deconstruct each narrative by examining the elements of yellow fever excluded in their portrayal of the war. My review of the first narrative is mainly based on primary sources including medical archives, accounts from generals from each side of the conflict, and civilians. These give me an overview of the prevailing knowledge at the time of the Haitian Revolution and the factors which were silenced by colonial accounts. However, one of the limits of that analysis is that given the circumstances surrounding COVID-19 some primary sources were in-accessible online and have been extracted from secondary sources. My analysis of the second narrative is mainly based on secondary sources from the late twentieth century. These help me examine the factors surrounding yellow fever which played a role in the revolution and were unknown at the time, therefore out of the control of the armies.

I. REVISITING THE FIRST NARRATIVE: EUROPEAN ARMIES LOST AGAINST YELLOW FEVER

Historians used the letters of Napoleon's brother-in-law, LeClerc, appointed to reconquer Saint Domingue and other of its generals to support the idea that French armies had lost not to a superior black army but to yellow fever - "The rebels would not be an issue, if they were our only

enemy" (Kerversau, 1800, as cited in Girard, 2011, p180). By emphasising its mortality rates and devastating effects, yellow fever was portrayed as an insurmountable force "The mortality continues and makes fearful ravages" (LeClerc, 1802, as cited in Marr et al., 2013, p79), "The yellow fever continued to rage, and Leclerc's reinforcements vanished almost as quickly as they came." (Stoddard, 1914, p334). An opponent different from any army, not because it was powerful, but because it was outside of any army's or man's range of influence "The West Indies was, quite simply, a deathtrap for whites without immunity to yellow fever" (Buckley, 1985), "A man cannot work here without risking his life" (LeClerc, as cited in Marr et al., 2013, p79). That framing of the disease as being not only central in the war's outcome, but also as an external, indomitable power, served to absolve the army of responsibility. This narrative and its framing of the disease, ignored the fact that both the European powers and slaves had a role in the extent to which the army was exposed and suffered from yellow fever.

The influence of both European's and slaves over yellow fever depended on their knowledge of the disease. The disease, known as 'yellow jack', 'black vomit' or 'mal de Siam', was historically the most lethal disease among whites in the Caribbean (Marr et al., 2013). It was also known that the disease predominantly affected Europeans, especially newcomers. Many of Napoleon's advisors had actually warned him against the 1801 expedition, including Charles de Vincent (1802, as cited in Girard, 2011, p160), on the basis that a white army could not survive long in

the tropics. Additionally, it had been observed and reported that seasonal outbreaks of yellow fever occurred during the hot, rainy summers, which in Haiti was around May to October. During that time of the year (known as “fever season”) the mortality due to yellow fever among white populations was much higher. Finally, by the 1790s it was known that higher ground was healthier ground for Europeans in the West Indies. That meant that the amount of deaths from yellow fever was higher in ports, and lower in mountains. While the reasons behind the lethality, differential immunity of yellow fever and its seasonal and geographical correlation were poorly understood, all these features were well known by the time of the Haitian Revolution. Therefore, yellow fever was not merely an unforeseeable external event, but to an extent, the use that each army made of the available knowledge of the disease influenced the outcome of the war.

Both the French and the British, guided by racist preconceptions, fatally underestimated the slaves' army, which made them unprepared to face yellow fever. The revolution occurred at a time in history where western ontology was based on the idea that black people were inferior to whites (Reinhardt, 2005). While some sort of riot against their masters was possible and had previously occurred, it was unthinkable that black slaves could organise themselves and combat a well trained European army (Pamphile Lacroix, 1802). An historical review tracing back the context which led the British to invade Saint Domingue barely mentions the rebels (Geggus, 1981). The main concern is Britain's relation with France, and the benefits the British empire could obtain from the invasion.

Similarly, Napoleon estimated that it would take six weeks to end the insurrection. Members of the expedition also expressed similar expectations, including general Lacroix (1802 as cited in Girard, 2011, p113) who anticipated slaves troops to be an “incompetent rabble” and general Hardy, who predicted Louverture's defeat within a month “this would not be difficult” (De Périni, 1901, p271). Based on the previous assumptions, and partially taking into account the seasonal risk of yellow fever, Napoleon arranged the expedition's departure so that it coincided with the winter months, when yellow fever is less frequent (Snowden, 2019, p130). Napoleon never imagined that the revolution would last two more years, or even until the summer fever season. Therefore, no preparations were made for the medical consequences that such a delay implied. Similarly, British undermined the role that slaves would have in the war, which explains why there was a lack of consideration concerning the differential immunity to yellow fever and the impact it could have. Therefore, this miscalculation of the opponent is partially responsible for the armies' unpreparedness to face the disease and its subsequent mortality.

Furthermore, both the French and the English decided to station their armies in ports, failing to take into account the risks and constraints of yellow fever. Ports were known to be a less healthy ground for Europeans and LeClerc chose to station on ports against the advice of the french health council (Girard, 2011, p163-165). Instead both armies, expecting the conflict to be short, prioritised taking rapid control over the plantation

economy. To put that decision in context, at the time of the Haitian Revolution, Saint-Domingue had the most valuable plantation economy in the world. Its exports from 1763 to 1789 surpassed those of the United States and were the main element behind the French “commercial revolution” of the second half of the eighteenth century (Marbois, 1790). Apart from economic interests two other factors influenced this decision: the need to re-supply and the risks of a guerrilla war in the mountains (where Toussaint’s troops were stationed) (McNeil, 2010, p250). While those factors might explain the decision of not stationing in the mountains, they do not justify why other middle ground solutions were not taken. For example, it was observed that ships were not affected by yellow fever when they were out at sea - “a navy [at anchor] is only a source of costs and disasters” (Decres, 1802, as cited in Girard 2011, p176). Based on that knowledge, LeClerc was asked to send ships on long cruises to diminish the mortality rates. He ignored these recommendations and passed decrees ordering the navy to stay at port (Latouche 1802, as cited in Girard, 2011, p176). There was no military rationale for that decision. Girard argues that LeClerc shared the Napoleonic army’s characteristic contempt for the navy, and wanted sailors to be exposed to the same risks soldiers did (Girard, 2011). Thus, both armies favoured political, economic, and personal values at the cost of increasing their exposure to yellow fever, and to this extent are responsible for the ravages the epidemics caused.

Finally, separately from whatever knowledge they had of yellow fever, there was a broader culture in European armies that

overlooked medical considerations. Sitting camps only regarded military considerations and had very low standards of personal hygiene. English troops' ill-fitting woollen uniforms were permanently caked with sweatmaking soldiers subject to “heat stress” (McLean, 1797, p123). Moreover, general hygiene in ports was also lacking. In a report they drafted at Leclerc’s request, the French health council proposed that the streets of le Cap be cleaned and the dead buried properly. They noted that despite its demands for better hygiene, multiple months had gone by and nothing had been done about it (Gilbert, 1802, p216-219). European armies also had a very low standard of nutrition “a diet entirely lacking for months on end in fresh meat and vegetables” (Geggus, 1979, p53). Heavy drinking was also normalised, “drunkenness in those days” wrote a former British surgeon looking back on the Haitian Revolution “was unrestrained and terrible” (Fergusson, 1846, p150). During LeClerc’s time, it was estimated that hundreds of patients died from lack of food and basic care. Hospitals were completely unprepared to face the epidemic. A situation which was only worsened by embezzlement. There are records that show that in the midst of the epidemic French generals spent over 48,000 francs of public money to redecorate their residencies with objects such as “crystal chandeliers” and “mahogany nightstands” (Prevot, 1802 as cited in Girard, 2011, p166). Leclerc’s house redecoration cost 175 000 francs. In contrast, the renovation of the hospital in Cap, was only 58,000 francs, even though they were recorded to have only a few dozen mattresses, lacked nurses and basic food (Girard, 2011). The failure to

implement simple prophylactic measures, ensure adequate nutrition while facilitating the consumption of excessive alcohol, and prioritising the comfort of a few generals over the life of hundreds of patients, greatly increased the financial and human costs of the yellow fever epidemic.

II. REVISITING THE SECOND NARRATIVE: EUROPEAN ARMIES LOST AGAINST SLAVES

From the second half of the nineteenth century, the historiography of the Haitian Revolution has downplayed the importance of yellow fever, precisely because an earlier generation had emphasised it in relation to racist arguments. *The Black Jacobins book* (1967) and subsequent work which emerged from it (Brewster, 1986; Forsdick, 2016) are centred around the actions of the leaders of the revolution. They use Toussaint's figure as a catalyst for change, a roadmap to guide new generations emerging during the black power and civil rights movement. Acknowledging the exploits of black slaves during the revolution is fundamental, especially considering the many years in which their role and side of the story was silenced. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this essay which is focused on the role of yellow fever, it is important to point out that their framing of the war, centred around black's legacy, fails to acknowledge the ways in which yellow fever was an external contributing factor. Yellow fever was a turning point in the war, incapacitating up to 70 percent of soldiers from European armies (Girard, 2011, p180), not simply because of the military decisions made by each individual army but also for a multitude of other reasons which were unknown

at the time. Thus, yellow fever's role in the war was also in many ways coincidental.

A crucial element which was not known at the time of the revolution was that yellow fever's vector was *AedesAegypti*, a mosquito, and that the ecological transformations associated with the plantation economy created a highly favourable environment for its reproduction and expansion. Firstly sugar plantations led to a widespread deforestation which diminished the habitat of insectivorous birds (McNeill, 2010, p48). Moreover, while *AedesAegypti* feeds mostly on human blood, they also like sucrose. Sugar plantations made cane juice easier to find, contributing to higher mosquito populations and prolonging mosquitoes' lives. The older a mosquito, the more likely it is to be infected with yellow fever and is able to transmit the disease. Additionally, in contrast to the majority of mosquitoes, *Aedesaegypti* prefers to breed in artificially stored water such as cisterns or barrels, rather than natural places such as puddles or swamps. Sugar was exported, which increased the amount of Caribbean port cities. Both ports, ships, and plantations stored large amounts of water, often in cisternsand barrels, creating ideal incubators for *AedesAegypti* (Ligon, 1657, p28-29; Kupperman, 1984, p231). Additionally, *AedesAegypti*'s flying range is limited to 100 meters, and they have difficulty flying across dispersed populations (Honório et al., 2003). In combination these factors make *Aedesaegypti* a highly domestic animal, more prominent in urban areas, which explains why soldiers died more often of yellow fever in ports than in

mountains. Finally, the sugar trade attracted thousands of sailors to the Caribbean every year, many of which had not been exposed to the disease previously. That meant that when infected, they served to move the virus from mosquito to mosquito, and from port to port, facilitating the creation of epidemics (McNeil, 2010, p44). While the economy and ecology of Saint Domingue contributed to the expansion of *Aedes Aegypti* and subsequently yellow fever, the causal relation between both was unintended, as was the fact that it happened to benefit black slaves during the war.

Moreover, regardless of both armies willingness to address yellow fever, the extent to which medical treatment could help was very limited, given that the cause and method of transmission of yellow fever was poorly understood. European doctors had no experience with tropical medicine and their treatments were ineffective - "The army was being sacrificed, so the colonists claimed, to the ignorance of British doctor's" (Geggus, 1979, p54). At the time of the Haitian Revolution, British medicine was based on drugs including camphor, mercury, calomel or laudanum, many of which only worsened patient's conditions (Chishol, 1795, p71, p 116, 180, 189, 248; Jackson, 1798; McLean, 1797). French treatments were also inefficient, as reported by 'the journal of medicine, surgery and natural history' written by French doctors in Saint Domingue (Trabuc et al. 1803). The treatments listed by the health council included purgatory, baths, enema, emetics and bloodletting, which if anything hastened the death of patients with yellow fever (Vincent, 1806, p28-p57). Moreover, the disease was believed not to be contagious and

therefore quarantine measures were rarely implemented, which we now know allowed for the disease to be spread by mosquitoes. While there was some knowledge of the disease, such as the fact that it was less common in mountains or that some treatments, like improving hygiene or warm baths, improved conditions, overall most of the expectations surrounding yellow fever were erroneous. Therefore to this extent both armies lacked control of the disease and are not entirely responsible for the effects it had.

Finally, even though the ecological and medical circumstances surrounding yellow fever were in various ways unknown and unintentional, the consequences the disease had for European populations were also in part the result of slaves' military strategy. The war between the black slaves and European's armies was asymmetrical: their training, their equipment, and the number of soldiers they had was lower than the French or British forces. However, Toussaint and Dessalines' military strategy relied on exploiting the power of differential resistance to yellow fever. Until the rainy season came, where yellow fever epidemics were more common, the slaves strategy was to avoid pitched battles against European armies and hold the mountains - "the rebels hide in the impenetrable woods bordering the valleys, then retreat to the hills when pressed" (LeClerc, 1802 cited in Girard, 2011, p115). Pushing both British and French populations to remain in ports. Therefore, black slaves fought defensively until July and August and then proceeded to go into attack when Europeans were far weaker - "Do not forget that while waiting for the rainy season, which will read us of our enemies, we have only destruction and

fire as our weapons" (Toussaint,1802). Similar accounts were written by Dessalines "take courage, the whites from France cannot hold out against us here in Saint Domingue. They will fight well at first, soon they will fall sick and die like flies" ("The Haitian Revolution 1801-1802", 2021). Therefore, precisely because of their reliance on yellow fever, acknowledging the role of the disease does not necessarily minimise black achievement, but can be used to showcase the effective leadership and strategy of black slaves.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both narratives use yellow fever to paint a skewed version of the revolution. By emphasising the powerful, uncontrollable effects of yellow fever, the first narrative fails to consider the context in which yellow fever epidemics emerge. Part of that context, is the role that European powers played in shaping the preparedness, response and effects of the disease on their populations. As shown by the impact that their military decisions, including stationing their armies in ports, underestimating the length of the conflict, and overlooking medical considerations, had in enabling the subsequent death tolls from yellow fever. The second narrative frames the conflict around the military decisions of both armies. By emphasising the impact that black slave's strategies had in the outcome of the war, they fail to consider or acknowledge that external factors, unknown at the time, including the ecological climate and the lack of medical knowledge, shaped the spread of the disease and its impact on European armies. Both framings of the revolution are tied to social and

political values. The first narrative uses yellow fever to downplay the role that French and British armies had in the loss of the revolution in order to reaffirm the superiority of white race. The second narrative responds to the previous racist argument tied to yellow fever, by de-emphasising the role of the disease, as a way of decolonising racist arguments, and arguing for the equality of individuals. Therefore, both narratives used the disease not only to defend a particular vision of the Haitian Revolution, but also indirectly to defend a particular worldview, linking prevailing beliefs to their historical analysis.

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