
In A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution, Jeremy Popkin has brought clarity to the kaleidoscope of groups, personalities, shifting alliances, and rapid changes that characterized this period. Benefiting from the recent outpouring of work on Saint-Domingue and the Haitian Revolution, he has woven together primary sources and the latest insights from Haitian, North American, and European historians in an account notable for its sensitivity to contingency and complexity, and its firm anchoring in a global context.

As in his study of the first abolition of slavery (2010), Popkin’s narrative highlights the contingent and indeterminate nature of these tumultuous events. He emphasizes that there was no direct or inevitable path leading from 1791 to 1804 and that outcomes might have been very different, reminding us, for example, how unintended and fragile abolition was in 1793. Also, by often outlining alternative choices available to the historical actors, he creates the sense of an undetermined and unfixed future facing them.

Though constrained by the limits of a short text, Popkin also skillfully illuminates the complexity of these events. He points out the great diversity of motives that animated the often bewildering number of groups and individuals involved, the lack of unity among them, and the reasons behind their sometimes shifting loyalties. One constant theme is the persistent division between the elite leaders, who wished to reanimate the plantation economy, and the mass of the people, who wanted greater autonomy and resisted efforts to return them to “disciplined obedience” (p. 104). Popkin also stresses the “complicated legacy” of the Revolution: violence, brutality, and authoritarian rule, on the one hand, and heroic sacrifice and achievement on the other.

Popkin tries to avoid a “purely celebratory narrative” that would distort history to produce a simple, triumphant story (p. 168). He points out, for example, that the regime did not simply crumble in 1791 and that early on its leaders did not yet envision the complete abolition of slavery. One great strength of the book is that two full chapters examine the era of “republican emancipation” (1793-1798) and Toussaint’s creation of the authoritarian “Louverturian state” (1798-1801), a period sometimes elided in more triumphal narratives that move almost directly from the stirring events of the slave insurrection to the fierce struggle against the French.
Reflecting current interest in Atlantic and World history, Popkin firmly anchors the Haitian Revolution in an Atlantic context, demonstrating how events on the island shaped, and were shaped by, what was occurring in France, Europe, the United States, and the wider Caribbean. One of the book’s major themes is the world historical significance of the Haitian Revolution, as the “most radical of the American revolutionary insurrections” (p. 2). Of the three Atlantic revolutions, only the Haitian Revolution enduringly committed itself to the abolition of slavery and to the elimination of racial discrimination. Yet this legacy was complicated and mixed as fear of another Haiti contributed to the rise of racism and a new European imperialism in the nineteenth century.

Accounts of the Haitian Revolution usually end in 1805, leaving readers to wonder why Haiti has “fallen behind other countries in terms of its ability to provide a good life for its people” (p. 157). Helpfully, Popkin has provided a chapter, “Consolidating Independence in a Hostile World,” that outlines Haitian history between 1804 and 1843. He points out that, in contrast to other Latin American and Caribbean countries, Haiti had by the 1840s “achieved a modest but respectable level of development” and that “in the nineteenth century [its] political history was in some ways not that different from that of… France” (pp. 156-57). He argues that the country’s more recent problems result from both internal factors, such as authoritarian rule, and external ones, such as domination by “foreign economic interests” and U.S. intervention (p. 158). Clearly, Popkin hopes that his readers will gain understanding of Haiti and not view its current problems and disasters as the “entire experience of the country and of its people” (p. 168).

While the available sources tell us mostly about the leaders, Popkin endeavors to achieve an account balanced between the elite and the masses. He devotes time to explaining the backgrounds, personalities, and goals of leaders such as Toussaint Louverture and Dessalines, but this is not simply a top-down story. He also describes the aspirations, experiences, and actions of the masses, highlighting the tremendous price they paid for freedom and the way they resisted efforts to return them to the plantations. However, the roles played by women receive less attention than they might have and the book would have been even stronger if additional material on them from the recent studies Popkin mentions had been included.