Jean-Jacques Dessalines: Reassessing the Haitian revolutionary leader’s legacy

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A statue of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a leader of the Haitian Revolution and the first ruler of an independent Haiti.

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Every Oct. 17, Haiti celebrates Dessalines Day, commemorating the assassination in 1806 of the country’s first head of state postindependence, Jean-Jacques Dessalines.

One of the founding fathers in the struggle for Haitian independence, alongside Toussaint Louverture, Dessalines has a mixed legacy: celebrated at home for his role in ending slavery and overthrowing French colonial rule, but often condemned internationally for his violent tactics and the 1804 killing of white French people in independent Haiti.

Historian Julia Gaffield's new book, "I Have Avenged America: Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Haiti's Fight for Freedom," provides a more nuanced view of Dessalines. The Conversation spoke with Gaffield about the challenges of presenting the Haitian leader to a modern readership.

What drove you to write the book now?

Although there have been biographies of Dessalines in Haiti and a heavily fictionalized one in France in 1804, until now there hasn't been one published in the English language.

And this silence forms part of a much longer process of demonizing Dessalines in the international sphere – he just doesn't get the same attention that Toussaint Louverture gets in the narrative of the Haitian Revolution.

What I found interesting was the Desssalines that emerged in my research didn't match the Dessalines that was being presented in public. I was interested in his international diplomacy and state-making, but many accounts just highlighted the violence of the revolution and Dessalines' very radical role.

On one side, he is criticized for being uniquely violent – something that wasn't even true in the context of the time. But characterizing him this way was an attempt to present him as "savage," "barbaric" and in line with other racist tropes. On the other hand, he is celebrated by Haitians and others for his use of violence. He was seen as the man for the job – the job of ending more than a century of French colonial rule.

A crude depiction of Jean Jacques Dessalines holding the severed head of a white colonist woman used to illustrate Louis Dubroca's fictionalized biography.

Manuel López López/Wikimedia Commons

But in the book, I tell a more complicated story of Dessalines. Yes, he was a military leader who fought on the front lines, and success came from violent warfare. But he was a multilayered person; his state-building wasn't just about violent revolution but also diplomacy and international relations and a deep commitment to abolitionism.

Why has Dessalines been singled out for committing violence?

A number of different things are at play here.

At the time, the French people reporting on the ground and from abroad held Dessalines and other Haitian revolutionaries to a different standard. While the white French colonists perpetrated acts of extreme brutality and violence, when Haitian revolutionaries fought back, they were criticized for not following the standard rules of warfare.

This was a double standard that all Haitian revolutionaries were held to – but Dessalines was singled out. The Haitian Revolution began in 1791, and the revolutionaries forced France to abolish slavery in 1793. After that time, Dessalines joined France to defend this hard-won freedom. And this is one of the parts of Dessalines' life that doesn't often get remembered or talked about – for much of the Haitian Revolution he was a French general, defending the abolition of slavery against attacks from other European empires. But when the French themselves started to undo abolition, Dessalines understood that freedom could be preserved only with independence.

Dessalines' reputation took on another layer in the war for independence and after. He ended up becoming an enemy of the French state, and criticism of Dessalines' violence helped the French undermine the fight for Haitian independence, especially internationally.

After he declared independence on Jan. 1, 1804, Dessalines executed some of the French colonists who remained on the island. This was legitimized as a way to protect the country from further invasions – which the French were constantly threatening to do. It was also vengeance for the crimes committed by the French colonists during the colonial era and during the horrific expedition sent by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802.

The 1804 killings of French people did a lot to forge Dessalines' image overseas. A lot of the narratives in the early months of 1804 were created from reports written by French and British people who were scared of Haitian independence and scared of the abolition of slavery.

Actual evidence of what happened is limited. But certainly not every white person was killed as is often stated. British and American merchants were safe, Polish people in Haiti were welcomed into the new nation, and even the reports of the number of French people killed undermine each other. Some white French people were even given Haitian citizenship.

But people at the time were not interested in making a nuanced argument or interested in understanding the Haitian perspective, and so they made sweeping claims about every last white person being "massacred."

These claims were part of a broader effort to demonize Haitians and ensure that independence failed.

And in some ways the emphasis on Dessalines' violence is odd. It overlooks the violence of slavery and the French colonial rule. The actions of the French in denying their defeat in Haiti were certainly much more significant to Haiti's long-term future than anything Dessalines did or didn't do.

How has the view of Dessalines changed since his lifetime?

In Haiti there have been ebbs and flows in how he has been remembered, especially in the 19th century. Part of this is because people there were living in a world in which Haitian sovereignty was not recognized by other counties. While it gained independence under Dessalines in 1804, the U.S. didn't recognize it until 1862.

And there were moments when people tied Dessalines' violent reputation to this foreign nonrecognition. But it was not the only reason that countries did not extend relations to Haiti.

It wasn't really until the 100th anniversary of independence, in 1904, when Dessalines finally got established in the pantheon of Haitian founding fathers. And it was from then that his memory was more firmly remembered as positive. The national anthem composed to celebrate the centenary is "La Dessalinienne," named in his honor, for example.

In Haitian politics today, he tends to stand in for national sovereignty and the rejection of external influence. That Haiti should exist with no outside meddling is his political reputation nowadays.

Outside of Haiti, it is only much more recently that Dessalines' actions have been seen in a more nuanced way.

But even now there is no consensus over his reputation. There are remnants of his portrayals from more than 200 years ago. Tucker Carlson in 2018 referred to Dessalines as a "genocidal nutcase." He was talking about the Haitian emperor in the context of a street in an area known as "Little Haiti" in Brooklyn, New York, being renamed in his honor.

But the renaming of the street also plays into the rehabilitation of Dessalines. His image has also been used in a Beats by Dre commercial featuring the tennis player Naomi Osaka. It also was used in Steve McQueen's "Small Axe" films.

Can you talk us through your choice of cover image?

The first thing to note is that none of the images we have of Dessalines were done by anyone who ever saw him – so they just made it up. That started with the very racist depiction of him in a Spanish translation of the 1804 biography "La Vie de J-J Dessalines" by Louis Dubroca, which included a person meant to be Dessalines holding a decapitated white woman's head. That image circulated and stuck.

Similar racist depictions were released, all meant to support an argument that Dessalines was born in Africa – which he wasn't – and was very "African"-like, by which they meant "savage."

The painting I used for the cover is by Haitian artist Ulrick Jean-Pierre. It shows Dessalines standing boldly and confidently. I also like the fact that the feathers on the cap and trees behind him are swaying: He is standing boldly but in a stormy, unsettled and complicated era.

Was researching the book tricky, given the bias of many sources?

Most of the records on the Haitian revolution were written by people who opposed the revolutionaries. But there is not nothing from the other side – there are accounts of these events written by Haitians, and there are letters and declarations by Dessalines himself. These, in my opinion, haven't been taken as seriously as they could have because so many people were trying to undermine Dessalines' political project. Throughout the book I take Dessalines' words seriously, and those of his fellow Haitian revolutionaries.

One of the things I encountered when I started this research was a lot of people saying, "There's not a lot of sources for that." One strategy I employed was looking for sources everywhere and anywhere. You can find sources on the revolution in Haiti but also in the U.S., France, the Netherlands, England, the Vatican and in Jamaica – anyplace that had interactions with Haiti.

What did you learn during the writing of the book?

I got a better sense of how personal the Haitian Revolution was to Dessalines. I had initially studied Dessalines through the lens of international diplomacy. So I saw him as a head of state, rather than an individual.

Through the research, I got a much better sense of the experiences that drove the man and his fight for freedom and against colonization – through his experiences with his extended family and his interactions with colleagues.

At the cost of personal relations and personal safety, he fought for freedom – and that was the driving force behind everything for Dessalines: the fight to abolish slavery.

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