HISTORICAL AMNESIA AND THE 1811 GERMAN COAST UPRISING

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On a rainy January 8th in 1811, the largest force of enslaved rebels in United States history marched on the muddy road along the Mississippi River, some bearing guns looted from the local militia's armory while others held aloft the tools of their daily labors, transformed into weapons of insurrection (Johnson 2017, 19). The estimated 200 to 500 enslaved men and women, led by the slave driver Charles Deslondes and his co-conspirators such as the enslaved Africans Kook and Quamana, chanted, "On to New Orleans!" and "Freedom or death," as they marched across plantations deserted by fleeing whites (Rasmussen 2011, 203). This uprising of enslaved people in the German Coast region was a shock to the American territorial government and the French planter class of the land recently acquired in the Louisiana Purchase, but just as quickly as the rebellion began, it was quelled in what one white planter and militia member called a "considerable slaughter" on the 10th of January (*Le Courrier de La Louisiane* 1811). Perhaps what is most shocking about the slave rebellion of 1811 is not the surprise felt by the white residents of the German Coast, who would have been sleeping off the effects of ongoing Carnival celebrations, but the fact that the uprising led by Charles Deslondes, in contrast to those led by Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, and others, has largely been ignored in the historical record due to purposeful obfuscation and the resulting widespread case of historical amnesia. The details of the planning process for this revolt were lost with the deaths of its leaders, but what we do know about the largest slave insurrection in United States history and its bloody suppression can tell us a great deal about the lives and thoughts of enslaved people and their masters in the rising Deep South during the early 19th century. Detailed research into this event also reveals how such information was covered up in order to maintain the white supremacist power structure that enforced chattel slavery.

The cliché that history is written by the victors is perfectly applicable in the case of the 1811 German Coast uprising, as 19th and 20th century historians primarily relied upon the narratives of the slaveholding class and territorial government of Louisiana when writing their accounts of the rebellion (Buman 2012, 333). However, a different story can be assembled from alternative sources, one involving a secretive recruitment process to assemble the core members of the revolutionary force, as "[l]eaders of slave revolts cannot easily muster a mass following" (Paquette 2009, 85). Augustin, a captured rebel, was asked in his trial "if he knew beforehand of the slave uprising" and "replied that… Charles Deslondes had a woman" on another plantation that he would visit with the permission of his master, but these meetings were also an excuse to meet with fellow rebels (Conrad 1981). There exists one account from a slaveowner, James Brown, of witnessing a meeting of Charles Deslondes with three fellow enslaved men "on the Saturday or Sunday night before the insurrection" (Paquette 2009, 89). Clearly, the suggestion by some scholars that "the revolt began as a spontaneous riot" is unsupported by these facts, but a more in-depth analysis of the unique situation of enslaved people in French and Spanish influenced Louisiana is required in order to understand how the rebels coordinated their revolt (Buman 2012, 324). For example, in 1774, a Spanish historian wrote that in their Sunday dances, enslaved people "plot their rebellions" and Daniel Rasmussen (2011) agrees that "there was nowhere better to build a revolutionary organization than the dances in New Orleans" (35). Therefore, further research into the dancing circles of enslaved people in New Orleans and other means of communication would be revealing as to the extent of discussion possible between the enslaved men and women of the German Coast.

As part of the complicity of historians with the "labeling [of] the rebellious slaves [as] 'banditti' and 'brigands'" (Paquette 2009, 84), commentators such as John Kendall in 1939 "asserted that the slaves had acted out of pure savagery" (Buman 2012, 321). These accounts accepted the portrayal of the rebellion as "an act of base criminality" (Rasmussen 2011, 159) by William C. C. Claiborne, the governor of the Territory of Orleans in 1811, who viewed the suppression of the uprising as "an important lesson in [the] weakness" of black people (Claiborne 1917, 130). However, these historians devalued the eyewitness accounts of "slaves in military formation with drums beating and flags waving" (Paquette 2009, 72), who, drawing on the influence of the successful slave rebellion in Haiti, donned militia uniforms (Rasmussen 2011, 100-01). In addition, the focus on the bloody defeat of the enslaved rebels by the local militia obscures the rebels' successful evasion of the federal troops deployed by Claiborne. According to Daniel Rasmussen, the federal troops fell for "a classic West African military ruse" (130) which "drew on significant Kongolese and Akan populations trained in guerilla warfare" among the rebellious army (90). In order to confirm this assertion, an important area of study would be a comparative analysis of the military tactics of the enslaved rebels and those of the West African kingdoms where rebels such as Kook and Quamana trained and fought before being captured and forced to endure the Middle Passage. Through such research, it would be possible to counter the portrayal of the enslaved rebels as a disorganized "hord[e] of brigands" (*Le Courrier de La Louisiane* 1811).

Unfortunately, many questions about the German Coast uprising will remain unanswered due to the nature of this historical event, but they nevertheless remain interesting to reflect upon. For example, while it is probable that the Haitian Revolution of 1791 had an influence on the

motivations and tactics of Charles Deslondes and his fellow rebels, the extent of this impact is impossible to truly know. What we can easily study and learn from is how the historians of the 19th and 20th centuries participated in the obfuscation of the 1811 slave revolt and contributed to the historical amnesia around the event. To counter this, an accurate and anti-racist analysis of this rebellion and others like it involves questioning the motivations of the contemporaneous sources and accounting for the agency of the enslaved men and women of the Deep South in this period, who were faced with the difficult choice of whether or not to join rebellions which were essentially death sentences for any participants. As we know based on population records of the German Coast region, "[t]he majority of slaves chose not to fight" in 1811 because "the clearest path to freedom was not to join a revolution but to betray one" (Rasmussen 2011, 104). In records from the court trials of captured rebels, there are several accounts of enslaved persons who warned their masters of the approaching army, and one enslaved man is praised for "joining the militiamen in defeating the rebels" (Conrad 1981). These accounts paint a complicated picture, but it is one that still acknowledges the brave decisions and actions of the approximately 100 enslaved people who were killed for the crime of wanting to be free.

In a letter from the 20th of January, Governor Claiborne expressed his hope that "[t]he example which has been made of the guilty actors in the late insurrection [would] produce the desired effect" (Claiborne 1917, 107). In this statement, Claiborne was referring to the "heads of the dead" rebels which were mounted on pikes along the River Road and which "served to remind those who passed beneath them of the inexorability of the emergent order" (Johnson 2017, 22). These monuments to the cruelty of the planter class were intended not only to scare the enslaved population into submission, but also to assuage the deep-seated fears of slave

uprisings among whites in the 19th century Deep South. Such fears contributed to the one-sided narratives disseminated about the rebellion and eventually lead to pervasive historical amnesia surrounding the 1811 German Coast uprising. However, analysis of the limited historical accounts which are available reveal important details about the ways in which enslaved people asserted their humanity through various forms of rebellion against the racist ideology and structures of chattel slavery.

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