

# REVOLUTIONARY VOICES THE PRESENCE OF VISITORS, FUGITIVES AND PRISONERS FROM THE FRENCH CARIBBEAN IN VENEZUELA (1789-1799)

*Posted on 10 Ottobre 2013 by Storia e Futuro*



**Categories:** [Agenda](#), [Numero 30 - Laboratorio](#), [Numero 30 - Novembre 2012](#), [Numero 30 - Rubriche](#)

**Tags:** [Barcelona](#), [Caribbean](#), [French Revolution](#), [Latin America](#), [rifugiati](#)



di **Cristina Soriano**

## **Abstract english**

This article studies the impact that the mobilization of people from the Revolutionary Atlantic had in the Province of Venezuela during 1789-1790. Despite all the mechanisms that the government established in order to control the entry of foreigners in the ports and urban centers of the province, between 1791 and 1796, more than 1,000 French and Caribbean people entered the province and brought news and information about the "Revolutions". This wave of rumors seriously preoccupied the officials who found it hard to control the oral transmission of information. At the outset, local authorities thought that this would be a temporary situation but solutions did not come as easily as they expected and problems began to arise as the "voices" of these foreigners circulated in the streets of La Guaira and Caracas. Here, I seek to analyze some of the stories of the revolution and the wave of rumors that erupted from this situation, in order to understand the several versions of the Revolutions that circulated in the province and that contributed to white paranoia and repressive behavior, as well as to black rebelliousness and hope.

## **Caribbean Communication Networks during the Age of Revolution**

After the start of the French Revolution, King Charles IV and his ministers were particularly concerned about the possible effects that its propaganda could have in his American territories. In September 1789, he was informed that some members of the National Assembly of Paris had strong interests in introducing seditious manifestos in Spanish America that "could shake the power of Spanish dominion amongst its inhabitants". Immediately after receiving this warning, the Spanish Minister, Count of Floridablanca, issued a Royal Order to the Governors of the Spanish Provinces in America, in which he demands a strict control over the introduction and diffusion of any paper that could "promote Independence and anti-religion". In this same communication, the Minister clearly recognized that written materials were not the only source of information that could contaminate the Spanish territories "with evil principles". since undesired visitors could spread "seditious ideas" very efficiently by word of mouth (( "Real Orden del Conde de Floridablanca, 24 de septiembre de 1789," Archivo General de la Nación-Caracas (AGNCC), Reales Ordenes, X, 140. )).

In December 1790, the Captain General of Venezuela wrote a letter to the Spanish Minister in which he underlined the direct connection that existed between the French Revolution and the movements and unstable situation of the French Colonies. Aware of the importance of being vigilant of the papers and ideas that were circulating in his Province, the Captain General expressed his fears about the danger that the proximity of the French Islands posed to the Province of Venezuela, considered the gateway to the Spanish American mainland (( "Orden del Presidente de la Real

Audiencia de Caracas," AGNCC, Gobernación y Capitanía General, XLIII, 96-97. Colonial authorities were always concerned about the entry of revolutionary ideas and Venezuela's geographical location and openness. See "Carta de Vicente Emparan al Capitán General Carbonell, 1793," AGI (Archivo General de Indias), Caracas, 94, no. 221. ). Similarly, he was concerned about the possibility that a great numbers of black fugitives from the turbulent Islands might enter the Province, and suggested that local slaves should be "entertained" and news relating to the situation in the French Colonies should not be divulged. In a sense, the attention that local authorities originally paid to the French Revolution and its propaganda was quickly supplanted by the preoccupation provoked about the proximity and "terrible example" of the French colonies. The threats of the French revolution spread to the nearby islands, and were transformed, in the local social context, into a more serious menace, because the upheavals of the French Caribbean incorporated both the free colored population and the slaves.

Immediately after the first news arrived about the events of Saint-Domingue, the concerns about possible revolutionary contagion in the Spanish territories increased. A Royal Decree of November 1791 instructed Viceroy, Captain Generals and Governors of Spanish America to maintain a neutral position with respect to the circumstances of the struggle between "blacks and whites in the insurrection of Guarico". However, it added, that if groups of pirates were to attack white communities on the high sea, the Spanish authorities were directed to act in accordance with the "rules of Humanity", providing aid to the white refugees, "but being careful to prevent the contagion of the insurrection in the Spanish possessions" (( "Real Orden e Instruccion del Rey a los Jefes de las Provincias en America, para prevenirles sobre el peligro de las Insurrecciones acontecidas en las Provincias, noviembre de 1791," AGNCC, Reales Ordenes, XI, 70. ). To prevent the circulation and proliferation of "dangerous" ideas that were originated in France and radicalized in the slave-holding Caribbean, the authorities in Venezuela introduced measures to control the ports, to organize censuses of the inhabitants in the ports and nearby cities, to spy on foreign visitors and neighbors and to investigate the reasons for their presence in the Province. The implementation of these measures to control revealed that authorities feared that news and rumors circulating by way of mouth represented a tangible threat to the social, economic and political stability of the Province. The authorities believed that rumors introduced by uninvited Caribbean visitors could bring chaos and disorder to the Province.

In semi-literate societies with no printing presses, rumors played an important role in the diffusion of knowledge (Guha 1999, 251). In Venezuela, rumors spread in public settings, such as public squares, *pulperías*, shops, and outside the Church buildings. Although it is extremely difficult to determine where and when the rumors of revolution emerged and vanished, or to identify those that put them in circulation, there are certain questions we can usefully pose: What kind of 'revolutionary' rumors were circulating among the inhabitants of the Province of Venezuela? Who were privy to those rumors? And how did they come to refer, not only to external, but also to local circumstances? (Kapferer 1987; Rosas 2005)

In his work on regional communication networks, rumors, and the divulgation of revolutionary events in the Caribbean, historian Julius Scott sustained that, traditionally, studies of commerce and trade, which were an important dimension of the historiography of eighteenth-century America, overlooked one of the most significant items that were exchanged: information (Scott 1986). Hence, Scott's study is important for understanding the importance the role that Caribbean communication networks played in spreading the images of revolutionary Saint-Domingue. Scott's work was already aligned with an incipient Atlantic historiography that sought to expand its analysis beyond political territorial limits and traditional chronological divisions. These historians, on one hand, sought to reintegrate the past of all the Americas, reincorporating it within a larger western and global context, and on the other, they also questioned the usefulness of conventional chronological divisions between the colonial and national periods. Along these lines, an increasing number of works became interested in exploring issues related to commercial activities and migratory movements (Price 1974; Pocock 1972; Halperin Donghi 1975).

Historians of the revolutionary Atlantic have recognized the importance of studying the complex web of commercial, social, and political relations that were built up within Port towns and cities during the age of the Revolution. The different revolts and social movements occurring in the Caribbean islands provoked important mobilizations of people of diverse social status, races and political tendencies across the American ports and cities that certainly altered the social dynamics, the political perceptions and even the economic circumstances of each location (Gaspar, Geggus 1997; Geggus 2001; 2002; González-Ripoll 2004; Gomez 2004; 2010; Piqueras 2005).

Here, I will study the repercussions that the mobilization of people from the revolutionary Atlantic had in the Province of Venezuela during the first years of the French Revolution, the Guadeloupe confrontations, and the Saint-Domingue rebellions. Despite all the measures that the government established and implemented in order to control the entrance of foreigners into the ports and urban centers of the Province, between 1791 and 1799, many individuals from France and the Caribbean islands entered the Province and carried news and information about the political events of France and its colonies. These visitors brought stories of the revolutions with them, and created a wave of rumors that contributed to the production and reproduction of several versions of the Haitian Revolution, and to the circulation of ideas about slave insurrection, violence, colonialism, equality, and freedom.

The "suspicious" people that entered the port-towns and cities of Venezuela were diverse: French visitors accused of sporadically talking out loud about the French Revolution in public places, sailors of all colors and maritime maroons coming from different latitudes who brought information about political instability and black upheavals, slaves from foreign islands brought by refugee families, French royalists and colored militiamen, aligned with different political agendas, who also had their own perceptions of the Caribbean situation and of relations between the metropolis and its colonies, and who even participated as agents for inducing social mobilization or, on the contrary, as

supporters of the local Government offering their services for the counterrevolutionary cause. All of them participated in the creation of an imprecise and diffuse image of the Haitian Revolution with different versions and emotional reactions overlapping, and with the local inhabitants projecting their own fears and hopes.

The wave of rumors that all these actors brought caused enormous anxiety to many authorities who found it very hard to control oral transmission of information, being aware that this information affected the perceptions that different subjects had about the Monarchy, vassalage, racial hierarchy, and the slavery system. Here, I seek to analyze and understand some of the versions of the Saint-Domingue Revolution that circulated in the Province in the forms of rumors, and that progressively contributed to white paranoia and repression as well as to pardos involvement in conspiracies, and to black "rebelliousness and haughtiness".

## **Controlling "Suspicious" French Visitors**

Viceroy, Captain Generals and Governors of the Spanish territories in America received specific royal orders to impede, at all costs, the entry of French Revolutionary ideas into their jurisdictions, because these ideas challenged the monarchy, the Church and the most essential concepts of a harmonic and obedient society. The need for establishing a "sanitary cordon" not only in the Spanish Peninsula, but also in all the Spanish territories required the implementation of numerous strategies to avoid contagion (Añes Álvarez 1989). In many written pieces in Spanish and American newspapers, the French Revolution was depicted as a "terrifying" movement, which consisted of wave of "murders, fires, parricide, regicide, and destruction of all the basic principles upon which the political, religious and social order rested" (Rosas 2005,149). The most fearful and frightful aspects of the French Revolution were the regicide, the attacks on religion and the Catholic Church, and the Terror. Spanish authorities perceived the Regicide as an extremely violent and barbarous act that questioned the basis of the Monarchy as a Divine Right; in consequence, the assassination of Louis XVI was conceived as a sacrilege committed in the most atrocious manner. Both political authorities and elites experienced fear in the face of a series of events that were accompanied by adjectives such as "horror", "terror", and "threat".

In Spanish America, these fears became strong reasons for persecuting those individuals who were perceived as possible agents of perturbation and opposition to the monarchical system, the Catholic Church, and the social order; and as a result, colonial authorities developed strategies to control the entry of foreigners who could become sources of contagion. In Venezuela, some restrictions on the presence of foreign visitors were already in place before the French Revolution. The geographical situation of the province encouraged not only the development of smuggling networks but also the entry of fugitives and "possible invaders" who always provoked preoccupation among the authorities who jealously suspected of every Dutch, English or French ship navigating close to the Venezuelan coast. However, after July 1789, the authorities were concerned about both the entry of foreigners

and the presence of foreigners already established in the Province who could be receptive to French revolutionary propaganda and contribute as well to its diffusion. In 1792, for example, the Captain General issued an Order to the Lieutenants of the diverse regions, to investigate the foreigners living in these regions, and to inquire "who they are, the lifestyle and customs of each of them, their occupation or profession, and the reasons for their presence in the Province". Likewise, he recommended finding out if these foreigners had expressed suspicious statements on paper or in conversations. He also added that if any of these foreigners were unable to demonstrate that they had a royal authorization for living in the Spanish territories, they had to be sent to Caracas "along with all their papers and books" (( "Orden a los Tenientes Justicias Mayores de Coro," AGNC, Gobernación y Capitanía General, XLVII, 68. )).

Immediately, the rumors and news about "suspicious foreigners" began to circulate throughout the Province. In the town of Siquesique – an Indian town located approximately 110 miles west of Caracas – a Frenchman named Jerome was persecuted for expressing opinions in public against the sacred dogma; and in the town of El Tocuyo a French doctor, named Pedro Deo, was also under suspicion for "saying or writing something against the State and in accordance with the spirit of Independence that is found in France" (( "Orden del Teniente Justicia Mayor de El Tocuyo," AGNC, Gobernación y Capitanía General, XLVII, 50. )).

In 1793, a French Doctor, named Victor Droin was accused of declaring in the main square of the town of Guanare – a small town located approximately 85 miles southwest of Caracas – that the "French people did well in killing the King of France". Droin was also incriminated by the priest of the town for "being opposed to the Spanish King in the War against France, and for revealing and expressing in public attitudes contrary to the Monarchy and, sometimes, even against Religion" (( "Expediente del caso del Doctor Francés Victor Droin," AGI, Caracas, 15, no. 8 and no. 13. )). This accusation of expressing phrases against both the monarchy and the catholic religion corresponded with the common characterization of revolutionaries as anti-monarchical, anarchists and atheists. The stories of French rebels who chased priests and nuns, and destroyed sacred ornaments and symbols of the Church circulated throughout the Atlantic world. In the eyes of Spanish Crown, the French revolution was sacrilegious and impious, and all the individuals that supported it, in any way, were depicted as cruel, anarchist and atheist. The Crown and the Church, in fact, developed a counterrevolutionary discourse deeply rooted in principles that encouraged sowing the seeds of religious faith in the entire society.

The case of Droin, among others from the rest of Spanish America, produced some distress in Spain and in March 1796, the King issued a Royal Decree in which he ordered the use of all the necessary vigilance to enforce the laws regarding the entry of foreigners, especially those from France, who could maintain "seductive or dangerous conversations with my loyal vassals". However, the King also recognized that his vassals were not altogether free from revolutionary contamination, so he also ordered that: "any person who in words or actions expresses attachment to the hateful maxims



of a misunderstood liberty, or tries to persuade another person, shall have a process opened" (( "Real Cédula sobre presencia de extranjeros en la Provincia, especialmente de franceses que pudiesen alterar el orden y la tranquilidad pública," AGI, Caracas, 169, no. 85. ))).

In 1794, Francisco Combret, a Frenchman who worked as a tobacconist in the city of Maracay, was accused of expressing subversive ideas. Combret was arrested "along with all his books and papers", and sent to Cádiz in 1795. Accompanying Combret in the same ship was the merchant Santiago Albi, original of San Sebastián, Spain, who was accused of celebrating the fall of San Sebastian at the hands of the French with fireworks. Albi was described by the authorities as "an insolent, vain and atheistic young man, capable of inspiring and moving others with the project that the National Assembly of Paris has spread" (( "El Gobernador a Juan N. Pedroza, noviembre de 1794," AGNC, Gobernación y Capitanía General, LIII, 30; also quoted in Callahan, "La propaganda, la sedición y la Revolución Francesa en la capitanía general de Venezuela," 183. ))). These suspects "infused with revolutionary ideas" were often referred to as "persons who challenged the colonial authorities and the Church".

Many of the French visitors who came to Venezuela, proceeded from those islands of the Caribbean that had sheltered hundreds of French families escaping from the "horrors of Saint-Domingue", and the "disorders in Martinique and Guadeloupe". Afraid of losing their slaves and their lives, some of these families fled to the Island of Trinidad that offered good prospects for recently arrivals (( "Sobre Ayuda monetaria a emigrados franceses en Trinidad," AGI, Caracas, 153, no. 60. ))). According to Rosario Sevilla, the waves of immigrants that established themselves in Trinidad contributed to the much needed demographic growth in the Island during the last years of the eighteenth century (( In 1788 there were 9,816 inhabitants in the Island of Trinidad; 3,807 were free and 6,009 slaves; by the year of 1797, when the British invaded the island, there were a total of 17,700 inhabitants, many of them had come from Saint-Domingue. See Rosario Sevilla Soler (1989). ))). The Governor of the island, Don Jose M. Chacón, commented: "a great number of French royalists have escaped from the persecution of the republicans. Among them, there are many prominent individuals from the most respectable families; most of them bring blacks and many instruments for agricultural labor, but there are others that need aid in order to survive" (( "Carta del Gobernador de Trinidad al Capitán General, julio de 1793," AGI, Caracas, 153, no. 37.

)).

The Governor of the Province of Cumaná, in the eastern region of Venezuela and separated from Trinidad only 15 miles of sea, Vicente Emparan, was wary of potential undesirable visits of French free people or slaves to his region. Effectively in 1795, missionaries of the region told Emparan that a suspicious visitor was "spreading seditious maxims in the Indian towns (*Pueblos de Indios*), which ceased to pay tributes", and that in some regions "Indians even abandoned the towns to go to the mountains, with serious consequences" (( "Oficio reservado del Gobernador de Cumaná sobre haberse introducido persona sospechosa en los pueblos de Indios," AGI, Caracas, 514, no. 8, 1. ))).

Emparan suggested that the Captain General reduce tributes, because "no other time is less appropriate than the present to raise the taxes, or introduce any novelty that could be burdensome" (( "Reservada del Gobernador de Cumaná al Capitán General sobre persona sospechosa y de sus peligrosas máximas que se han introducido en el pueblo de San Bernardino y otros lugares de la Provincia," AGNC, Gobernación y Capitanía General, LIV, 205. )). Immediately, the Captain General sent an order in which he eliminated the last official orders increasing tributes, and reduced Indians' tributes to "as what they were before". He also decided that Indians could pay tributes in "species", as they used to do (( "Real Orden a los Gobernadores de La Guaira, Puerto Cabello, Coro y Cumaná, con copia a la Real Hacienda," AGI, Caracas, 514. no. 8, 2. )).

A witness who met the "dangerous" visitor, told Emparan that he had heard him say that:

Someday these lands are going to be ruled by other people, and the poor people will finally be able to breathe, and they will receive help to progress, they will see more *haciendas* and sugar mills, and commercial activities free of rights and taxes. Soon everybody will be rich and powerful (( "Reservada del Gobernador de Cumaná al Capitán General sobre persona sospechosa y de las peligrosas máximas que se han introducido en el pueblo de San Bernardino y otros lugares de la Provincia," AGNC, Gobernación y Capitanía General, LIV, 206. )).

He ended his speech concluding: "the Spanish King has tyrannized this land". The foreigner did not have any luggage, his only possessions were a hammock to sleep and some papers he frequently read and wrote. Another witness, Fray Vicente Blasco, commented that he had met the visitor, and after letting him expose his "dangerous ideas", Fray Blasco accused him of being French, the man contested that he was Spanish but had been raised in France; had lived in Mexico and then moved to Trinidad, where he currently lived. He traveled occasionally to the Province of Venezuela to sell mules and other products. He also claimed to be up to date on all the news about the situation of the French Antilles. When Father Blasco told him that he was not a good vassal of the King, because a good vassal obeys his father, the visitor, whose name was not revealed, replied: "It is true, but sometimes they want to pull the cord so tight, that it snaps" (( "Representación de Fray Vicente Blasco al Gobernador de Cumaná," AGNC, Gobernación y Capitanía General, LIV, 207. )). The capture and exile of this visitor was considered extremely important, since this kind of individual took advantage of the "simplicity of the Indians, who are easily persuaded, and currently may produce serious bad consequences for the public order, and the happiness of the vassals" (( "Reservada no. 21 al Intendente de los Reales Ejercitos de Caracas," AGI, Caracas, 514. )). It was believed that this person proceeded from the Island of Trinidad and traveled across the region until arriving in Caracas. Apparently, he was never located.

The colonial State firmly believed that subaltern disobedience actions and rebellions were always inspired by external factors, and normally depicted Indians and blacks as "simple minded", incapable of thinking politically for themselves or of rebelling in response to an unfair system. The situation of an individual inciting others to rebel was considered scandalous, even more serious if these others



were numerous subaltern subjects who, infused with "foreign ideas", refuse to obey and to be loyal to the King. Two fears intersected here: fear of contagion of revolution and fear of subaltern disobedience and rebellion.

## The Presence of Fugitive Slaves and Maritime Maroons

Given the menace that the communication network among slaves in the Caribbean represented, the first actions that the Spanish and local authorities undertook were designed to seal themselves off from the impact of the Caribbean turmoil. In November 1791, right after the news of slaves uprisings in the North of Saint Domingue began to spread, the Spanish King restricted the slave trade and the entry of French ships into the local ports, in order to control the dissemination of revolutionary rumors. In February 1792, for example, the Captain General of Venezuela wrote confidential letters to the Governors of the different Provinces reminding them to prohibit the entry of any French ship that comes "even with the intention of selling slaves" (( "Circular reservada del Capitán General de Venezuela a los Gobernadores sobre introducción de embarcaciones francesas," AGNC, Gobernación y Capitanía General, VI, 29. )).

Evidently, the restrictions on the slave trade would affect the agricultural development and economic growth of the Spanish Provinces, and white Spanish and creoles planters in different Provinces were well aware of the negative economic consequences of these restrictions (González Ripoll, Naranjo 2004; Sevilla Soler 1989). Therefore, in June 1792, the King issued a Royal Decree in which he explained that the restrictions on the slave trade had been examined by the Ministers of the Spanish State Council, and they had decided to eliminate them, and permit the "controlled" entry of French ships in that came to Spanish Ports with the exclusive purpose of selling "bozales", that is, Africans newly enslaved who could not put in jeopardy the Spanish territories with the spreading of "French ideas".

During the entire eighteenth century, the fleeing of slaves from the Antilles to Venezuela was a common and a frequent occurrence. Thanks to order that protected them, slaves coming from different foreign islands in the Caribbean achieved their freedom and settled in the province (( "Real Cédula de Su Majestad sobre declarar por libres a los negros que viniesen de los ingleses u holandeses a los reinos de España buscando el agua del bautismo. Buen Retiro, 24 de septiembre de 1750," AGNC, Caracas, Reales Cédulas, X, 332. )). Nevertheless, in May 1790 the Captain General of Venezuela, Juan Guillelmi, received a Royal Order from Spain forbidding the entry of foreign slaves to the Province (( "Real Orden reservada del 21 de mayo de 1790," AGI, Caracas, 115. )).

Although, the Captain General issued this order restricting the application of previous "Reales Cédulas" that declared freedom for fugitive slaves, the clandestine introduction of fugitive blacks coming from the Islands was inevitable and continued in the subsequent years. According to Ramón Aizpurua (2007), during the eighteenth century in the Province of Venezuela there were three different regions through which the entry of foreign slaves was possible: in the south, where slaves

from the Dutch Essequibo entered the Spanish province of Guayana; in the western region where slaves from English and French colonies, like Grenada and Trinidad, entered the region of Cumaná; and in the eastern area of the Province where a migratory movement of slaves from Curaçao to the Coast of Caracas, and particularly to the area of Coro, was intense and permanent.

Several other communications issued by white planters from 1794 to 1797 reveal the presence of former slaves from the Antilles living in black communities of Coro and Barlovento. Unfortunately, it has been difficult to find documentation and evidence regarding the kind of stories and rumors that these fugitive slaves from the Antilles brought. An interesting case reveals the kind of information and knowledge that these foreign slaves brought with them. During the evening of July 25<sup>th</sup> 1797, a mulatto boy who was walking over a bridge in the Port of La Guaira was suddenly taken prisoner by the local officials. They demanded that the little boy – held as a slave by a white creole from Curaçao, Francisco Diego Hernández – repeat the French songs he had been singing on the bridge. He sang various songs in French to the authorities. According to the document, all the songs contained the same chorus: “Long live Republic, Long Live Liberty, Long live Equality” (( “Sobre extrañar de estas Provincias a los negros extranjeros que no sean de Guinea, y providencia observada contra de Don Francisco Diego Hernández por su inobservancia,” AGNC, Gobernación y Capitanía General, LXXI, 1-4. )). The little boy, named Josef, commented that he had learned the songs and that his master frequently sent him to other houses in the port to sing them to friends and family members, and that he even visited the Mail Administrator of the Port who also heard him singing them. Little Josef told that two other slaves of Hernández, Marcos and Domingo – like himself, natives of Curaçao –, also knew many songs and used also to sing them to others.

The authorities decided to transcribe some lyrics of the songs, and although it was not easy to establish the precise content of all the verses, it seems clear that the boy was singing French revolutionary songs. The songs contained verses like: “The Republican sans-culotte is a friend of Liberty”, “Long live the French Republic, French liberty and Equality”. “Let’s go, French citizen and form your troops, march with our cannon”, and “Come and die for your homeland France”. The authorities agreed that the little mulatto did not sing “with evil intentions”, but they considered that the act of “singing these kind of verses in the streets” was extremely dangerous and could have terrible effects on the population. They decided to keep the little boy with them until they were able to find his master and proceed with further inquiries. The Captain General became particularly concerned about the spreading of French revolutionary songs in the ports and ordered the immediate exile of the three slaves. He also commanded that slaves’ owner pay a fine of one thousand pesos for, in the first place, disobeying the laws and bringing foreign slaves to the Spanish Port and, in the second place, for ordering the slaves to sing “dangerous” songs in public spaces (( “Acuerdo del Gobernador de Caracas sobre esclavos de Curazao en el Puerto de La Guaira, 27 de julio de 1797,” AGNC, Gobernación y Capitanía General, LXXI, 6. )).

At the end of the eighteenth century, some families of Spanish Santo Domingo also migrated to

different ports located in Venezuela. Following the laws of hospitality for inhabitants of Spanish territories, local authorities received them and made arrangements to settle them in the Province or relocate them in other regions. However the authorities were especially concerned about the introduction of their slaves into the Province.

In 1796, for example, the Capitan General sent a confidential letter to the Commander of La Guaira ordering him to control the entry of slaves coming with families proceeding from Spanish Santo Domingo. Three days later, the Commander of La Guaira responded that he had not yet identified any French slave among the people from Santo Domingo. Additionally, he mentioned that he had visited Juan de Andueza, a town shopkeeper, and asked him if he had been in Santo Domingo or had slaves proceeding from there. The Commander also requested Andueza to give him any news regarding the presence of foreign slaves in his shop or in the town (( "Reservada entre el Comandante Interior de La Guaira y el Gobernador de Caracas," AGNC, Gobernación y Capitanía General, LIX, 268. )). The *bodeguero* (shopkeeper) seemed like the right person to ask about the presence of foreign slaves, since his job allowed him to have daily contact with foreigners coming to and leaving the Port. Why was the Captain General of Venezuela so concerned about the introduction of these slaves in the Province? Apparently, the presence of hundreds of officials, prisoners and slaves from Saint-Domingue in the port of La Guaira some years earlier had created an extremely difficult situation that the Captain General wanted to avoid by all possible means.

## **The Impact of French Caribbean Militiamen and Colored Prisoners in the Coast of Caracas (1793-1796)**

Between 1793 and 1795, more than 1,000 French militiamen, prisoners and slaves from Santo Domingo, Martinique and Guadeloupe arrived and stayed in different port-towns of the Province of Venezuela. All of them brought stories and rumors of republicanism, black insurrection, the abolition of slavery and equality that rapidly spread among the local population. People in Venezuela responded differently to the news and information. Some showed a profound *francophobia*, rejecting them and firmly opposed the influences and rumors coming from the turbulent Caribbean. They also felt threatened by the possibility that this information could incite people of the lower orders to rebel and follow the model of the French. Others, on the contrary, opened spaces for discussion and debate regarding the recently arrived ideas, news, and written materials, and adapting them to the local context, and even planning political actions aiming to produce transformations. The rumors that arrived were diverse and ambiguous, and the reactions they produced among their receivers and reproducers were likewise different and contrasting. As a classic psychological work suggests, rumors "sometimes provide a broader interpretation of various puzzling features of the environment, and so play a prominent part in the intellectual drive to render the surrounding world intelligible" (( Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor*

(New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1947), 38, quoted in Wim Klooster, "Le décret d'émancipation imaginaire. Monarchisme et esclavage en Amérique du Nord et dans la Caraïbe au temps des Révolutions," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* (forthcoming, 2011). ). Rumors represent a complex web of information and representations about certain events; some contents and ideas of this web could become more significant and relevant than others. It is precisely the reflection of people's perceptions, fears and desires in this web what makes some rumors more powerful than others. While some rumors can pass unnoticed, others could alter the prevailing order, stir mobilization and even become a clamor.

In August 1793, the Governor of Santo Domingo, Don Joaquín García, sent five hundred and thirty eight prisoners, slaves and French officials to the port of La Guaira. They were located in the dungeons of the Port. The presence of this important number of Frenchmen from Saint-Domingue was considered disruptive and extremely dangerous for the harmony and tranquility of the Port and the rest of the Province.

On November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1793, an extraordinary Junta was held in which the Captain General of Venezuela, the Quartermaster General, some members of the Audiencia, and members of the Church met to discuss the problem posed by the presence of these men and the potential solutions. Members of the Junta shared the same perception that white elites and different authorities of the Ports had of the French prisoners and slaves coming from Saint-Domingue as "people infused with pernicious maxims and doctrines, who desperately seek to extend their ideas among local slaves, free blacks, and mulattos" (( "Informe de la Junta extraordinaria convocada por el Gobernador de la Provincia para tratar problema de los prisioneros de Santo Domingo, 30 de noviembre de 1793," AGI, Estado, 58, no. 3 and no. 4. )). Members of the Junta stated that neighbors from La Guaira and Caracas were preoccupied because, since the arrival of these prisoners to the Port, local slaves and free coloreds were misbehaving and having an unacceptable arrogance towards their masters and employers.

The report, produced in this first meeting of the Junta, compiles a number of interesting complaints about the attitude of free blacks and slaves. For example, a person who was in a bakery of La Guaira saw and heard two slave bakers who "were conversing while kneading the bread, and – confident that no one was hearing – saying that within a year they would be as free as those in Guarico". Another witness denounced that he heard one slave saying to another that "this was the right moment to shake the slave system and the authority of the Spanish, in the same way the blacks of Guarico had shaken the authority of the French" (( "Informe de la Junta extraordinaria convocada por el Gobernador de la Provincia para tratar problema de los prisioneros de Santo Domingo, 30 de noviembre de 1793," AGI, Estado, 58, no. 4. )). These denouncements were clear evidence that Saint-Domingue rebellions were being taken as examples by the slaves and coloreds of La Guaira, but more importantly that the elites perceived the menace that these discourses represented. Likewise, there were others denouncements in the report that did not necessarily refer directly to the Revolution as an event, but showed how the ideological and political tenets of the Revolution were

applicable to the local context. A Spanish official, for example, commented that he heard a black French official saying to a slave that "no man should be the slave of another". In the same way, a lady in La Guaira complained that, after offering a domestic job to a free mulatta, the mulatta commented airily that "there was no inequality between the two of them except for their color, as for the rest they were equals".

In the report, all three groups (prisoners, slaves, and the French officials) were described as "irreligious" and out of order in their moral and political behavior. The officials were accused of not respecting religious ceremonies, turning their back to the sacred ornaments, and using their time in the Church to look at the ladies up and down, causing distractions and generally being a bad example. Many of them were accused of being anti-religious and not attending Church in Sundays. For their part, the prisoners from Saint-Domingue in La Guaira "break all the limits of good behavior, they blaspheme against the most sacred, insulting our government and lauding the fact that they are free men" (( "Informe de la Junta extraordinaria convocada por el Gobernador de la Provincia para tratar problema de los prisioneros de Santo Domingo, 30 de noviembre de 1793," AGI, Estado, 58, no. 4. )).

Finally, the report comments that during the last three years, specifically from 1790 to 1793, there had been increasing evidence of disobedience and arrogance on the part of the black slaves of the Province. This recent misbehavior of the colored was perceived as evidence that the news regarding the events of the French colonies had a real impact on blacks and the mixed races: the presence of this crowd of people from Saint-Domingue has brought "to life their [slaves' and free blacks'] desires for equality and freedom". Therefore, they had to implement urgent strategies to control the influence of these prisoners, and more important, to expel them from the Province.

The members of the Junta asserted that the fort of La Guaira, where the prisoners and some officials were being held, did not fulfill the conditions necessary to prevent the spreading of the "dangerous voices" of the prisoners that had been heard beyond the walls of the dungeons. They believed that it was too difficult to send them to Europe, so they decided to send them to La Havana, whose Governor could receive them and try to sell them to the local masters or use them for public service.

While the authorities discussed what to do with the 538 prisoners that had arrived in August, another load of prisoners and slaves from Saint-Domingue was received in the coast of Caracas on November 3, 1793. This time there were 431 men – 188 French prisoners of war, 220 slaves for sale, and 14 regular black prisoners –. The French prisoners were supposed to join their countrymen in the dungeons, while the slaves were to be offered for sale to the landowners and planters of the Province. In the meantime, local Authorities believed that the situation was getting out of their control and that they needed to take a rapid decision to expel these unwanted and "dangerous" people from the Province because their presence was significant. There were a total of 969 people from Saint-Domingue located in the Port town of La Guaira, this number represented more than 10 percent of the total population of the town of La Guaira that, by that time, amounted close to 7500



inhabitants.

In the beginning, local authorities thought that this would be a temporary situation and that the slaves, for example, could be rapidly sold for a good price among the local *hacendados*, or could be sent to other cities and ports of Spanish America. However, neither of these two solutions came as easily, nor as soon as they had expected, and problems began to arise. The first problem they confronted was that, whatever the price, local planters did not want to buy slaves educated in the French Antilles, or, even worse, blacks who had seen and experienced the "atrocities that blacks committed against whites in the rebellions of French Sto. Domingue". These slaves were brought to La Guaira with the condition that they could be sold to the local *hacendados* and that the money from their sale would go directly to the *Real Hacienda* of the Province. Nevertheless the *hacendados* rejected the offer: "there is no possibility that these slaves would be bought by the *hacendados* and neighbors of this country, because no one will bring the stimulus of insubordination, lack of religion, and the corruption of good habits into his home".

As we mentioned before, slaves were seen as agents of contamination of revolution and insubordination in a Province that was, supposedly, known for its "a tranquility and sincere obedience". At the end of November 1793, the Real Audiencia met again in an extraordinary session to discuss the situation regarding the slaves and prisoners that had been recently introduced into the Province. The report contends that the slaves and prisoners were uneducated and disobedient, challenging local authorities and aiming at disturbing the order of the town. In addition, it also argued that the fortifications and dungeons in La Guaira were too small to contain all these people, and that it had been impossible for Spanish officials to control "the bad example and the dangerous doctrines of these desperate and uncontrolled men" (( "Informe de la Junta extraordinaria convocada por el Gobernador de la Provincia para tratar problema de los prisioneros de Santo Domingo, 30 de noviembre de 1793," AGI, Estado, 58, no. 4; see also "Reservada del Intendente del Ejército Don Esteban Fernández de León, donde da cuenta de haber concurrido la Junta Extraordinaria convocada por el Gobierno para tratar sobre los recelos que a la tranquilidad pública de aquellas provincias ocasionan los oficiales franceses," AGI, Caracas, 505. )).

After several months trying to control the interactions and influence of these prisoners and slaves from Saint-Domingue in the port of La Guaira, the colonial authorities managed to expel the greater part of them by the end of 1795. Several communications with other Governors of the Spanish islands, and between the local authorities, allows us to perceive their desperation to get them out of the Province. In first place, the Captain General and the Quartermaster General tried to find the most convenient ways of sending them elsewhere. They sent several communications to the Governor of Santo Domingo, the Governor of Cuba and the Governor of Puerto Rico. It was fairly clear that the more than seven hundred prisoners of war would be sent to La Habana, where there was more space to hold them in the dungeons and fortifications and where there was less danger of a contamination of the rest of the Spanish territories.



Getting rid of the “unwanted immigrants” proved to be a very difficult task, and the authorities of the Province also had to find the ways to prevent upheavals and social movements that could have been inspired by the presence of these prisoners and slaves from Saint-Domingue. In January 1795, for example, the interim Quartermaster of Caracas, sent a letter to Spain in which he mentions some measures taken to contain possible uprisings. He argued that after a year and a half of “contamination”, they had become aware that “dangerous doctrines” had influenced the colored population, “especially the pardos (mixed-race), whose uncontrollable need to emulate the whites, and the characteristic haughtiness continue to increase apace” (( “Representación del Intendente de Caracas, Don Antonio López de Quintana al Exmo. Señor Don Diego de Gardorqui, sobre medidas necesarias para que no se propaguen las doctrinas francesas por parte de los prisioneros y esclavos franceses que se hallan en La Guaira, febrero de 1795,” AGI, Caracas, 472 and 514. )). For this reason, the colonial authorities in Caracas had decided to confine to the barracks two and a half of the companies of whites in order to prepare and alert them about possible uprisings, and guarantee the security of the Province. They also decided to establish “neighborhood mayors” (*Alcaldes de barrio*) whose responsibility was to control any news or circulation of rumors among the population as well as to do rounds to watch out for any suspicious meetings and movements. He believed that the close supervision of the Magistrates should be enough to control the spread of any “perverse plan”. However, he alerted: “We cannot count on a true security until all these prisoners and immigrants get out of the Province” (( “Representación del Intendente de Caracas, Don Antonio López de Quintana al Exmo. Señor Don Diego de Gardorqui, sobre medidas necesarias para que no se propaguen las doctrinas francesas por parte de los prisioneros y esclavos franceses que se hallan en La Guaira, febrero de 1795,” AGI, Caracas, 472 and 514. )).

During the years 1794 and 1795, different ships carrying large numbers of French slaves, prisoners, and officials departed from the port of La Guaira in direction to Puerto Cabello, and with La Havana as their final destination. In April 1795, 220 imprisoned slaves and four “free French men” left the Port of La Guaira for Batabanó (Cuba). Among them, four white French officials were sent to La Havana and later shipped to Europe.

Every time one of these ships left, the colonial officials in Venezuela experienced a feeling of relief for various reasons. In the first place, they recognized the economic burden that these prisoners represented to the government budget that had to provide them with maintenance expenses; in the second place, they thought that with them, the “dangerous ideas of liberty and equality” were being expelled from the territory. However, those prisoners and slaves had left “the seed of disobedience and haughtiness” among the local pardos, free blacks and slaves who did not only know about Saint-Domingue and its brave colored rebels, but who also understood that they could stir mobilization. All these cases show the emergence in different towns of the Province of Venezuela of socially diverse spaces where revolutionary ideas from the Atlantic were welcomed and adapted into the local context. Especially in port towns, such as La Guaira, Puerto Cabello and Cumaná, and in nearby communities it was possible to perceive a “revolutionary environment”. In the case of La

Guaira, the presence of almost one thousand immigrants from Saint-Domingue could not pass unnoticed and had, in fact, evident repercussions in every-day conversations, songs and fights, and the planning of a Republic conspiracy uncovered in La Guaira in July 1797.

Per citare questo testo attenersi alle seguenti indicazioni: Cristina Soriano, *Revolutionary Voices The Presence of Visitors, Fugitives and Prisoners from the French Caribbean in Venezuela (1789-1799)*, in "Storia e Futuro", Rubriche: Agenda, n. 30, novembre 2012.

## Biography

Cristina Soriano obtained her Ph.D. in History from New York University. She currently works as an Assistant Professor of Latin American History in Villanova University, Pennsylvania, United States of America, while she continues working in the manuscript of her book "Reading and Writing in Venezuela during Revolutionary Times, 1789-1810".

## Bibliography

Añes Álvarez de Castrillón G.

1989 *España y la Revolución Francesa in Revolución, Contrarrevolución e Independencia: la Revolución Francesa, España y América*. Madrid, Turner.

Aizpurua R.

2007 *Esclavitud, navegación y fugas de esclavos en el Curacao del siglo XVIII*. XI Encuentro-Debate América Latina Ayer y Hoy, Barcelona.

Gaspar D.B., Geggus D.P. (cur.)

1997 *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean, 1789-1815*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

Geggus, D.P. (cur.)

2001 *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*. Columbia, University of South Carolina Press.

2002 *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2002.

Gómez A.

2004 *Fidelidad bajo el viento, revolución y contrarrevolución en las Antillas francesas en la experiencia de algunos oficiales emigrados a tierra firme 1790-1795*. México, Siglo XXI.

2010 "Le Syndrome de Saint-Domingue. Perceptions et représentations de la Révolution haïtienne dans le Monde Atlantique, 1790-1886". PhD diss., Ecoles de Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris.

González-Ripoll M.D., Naranjo C., Ferrer A., García G., Opatrný J. (cur.)

2004 *El rumor de Haití en Cuba: temor, raza y rebeldía, 1789-1844*. Madrid, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas.

Guha R.

1999 *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Durham, Duke University Press.

Halperín Donghi T.

1975 *Politics, Economics and Society in Argentina in the Revolutionary Period* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Kapferer J.N.

1987 *Rumeurs: Le plus vieux médie du Monde*. Paris, Seuil.

Piqueras J.A. (cur.)

2005 *Las Antillas en la Era de las Luces y la Revolución*. Madrid, Siglo XXI.

Pocock J.G.A.

1972 *Virtue and Commerce in the Eighteenth Century*, "Journal of Interdisciplinary History" 3.

Price J.

1974 *Economic Function and the Growth of American Port Towns in the Eighteenth Century*, "Perspectives in American History" 8.

Rosas Lauro C. (cur.)

2005 *El miedo en el Perú, siglo XVI al XX*. Lima: Fondo Editorial de la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.

Scott J.

1986 "The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution", Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University.

Sevilla Soler R.

1987 *Las repercusiones de la Revolución Francesa en el Caribe español. Los casos de Santo*

*Domingo y Trinidad*, "Cuadernos Americanos Nueva Época" 5, no. 17.

