

HAITI'S HISTORY:

WHAT YOU WON'T READ IN THE NEWSPAPERS

The January earthquake in Haiti was one of the worst natural disasters in recent memory. It has killed at least 230,000 people and injured 300,000. A month after the earthquake one million Haitians remained homeless.

But the disaster has not been entirely "natural." Prior to the earthquake a combination of incredible poverty, inequality, and government neglect left ordinary Haitians extremely vulnerable, leading to thousands of additional deaths. A week after the earthquake, the medical organization Partners in Health reported that at least 20,000 survivors were dying *each day* for lack of medical care. Much of this unnecessary suffering and death has been the result of the heavily-militarized US response, which has placed a higher priority on safeguarding private property than on helping the victims, and has placed bureaucratic obstructions on the delivery of aid while assistance from other countries arrived within a day or two of the earthquake. Meanwhile, the US media has spread rumors of widespread "looting" and rampaging gangs terrorizing the population. Those images have little basis in reality; far more common on the ground in Haiti have been resilience, generosity, and cooperation as ordinary people have come together to rescue survivors and meet their basic needs. Some observers have called the way that governments, media, and corporations respond to crises the "second wave of disaster." In contrast, most ordinary Haitians have shown tremendous courage and strength. (For more information on the earthquake and its aftermath, see www.democracynow.org/tags/haiti and the SJA info sheet *Earthquake in Haiti: Realities, Myths, and Witnesses*.)

While the Haiti earthquake has inspired millions of compassionate people to donate money and supplies, it should also cause us to reflect on Haiti's history. Newspapers and TV news shows in the US frequently comment on Haiti's dire poverty, but they almost never provide any substantive analysis of the *roots* of that poverty. Yet an understanding of Haiti's history is essential for understanding its current plight.

Why is Haiti so Poor?

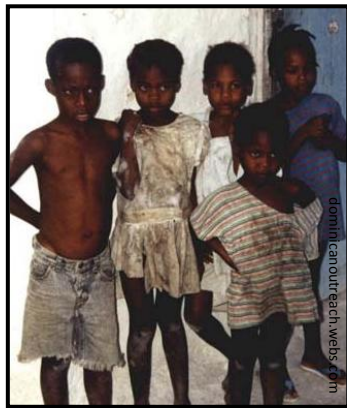
Many factors have contributed to poverty and inequality in Haiti, but the role of foreign imperialism stands out. After the island of Hispaniola (which includes Haiti and the Dominican Republic) was "discovered" by Columbus, nearly all the indigenous people there were killed as a result of European diseases, enslavement, and outright murder. For nearly two centuries the island remained under Spanish control before Haiti (then known as Saint Domingue) became a French colony in 1697. Soon after, the French began importing massive numbers of enslaved Africans to work on sugar plantations for the benefit of French aristocrats. Saint Domingue was the wealthiest colony in the Caribbean for most of the eighteenth century, but almost 90 percent of the population was enslaved and lived in misery while a tiny fraction of white and mixed-race slaveowners lived luxuriously.

The French Revolution of 1789, with its lofty rhetoric about "liberty, equality, and fraternity," was not meant to include Haitian slaves. But in 1791 those slaves seized upon that rhetoric and rose up in revolution against the slaveowners, declaring their freedom and taking up arms to defend it. When reactionary leaders came to power in France in the mid-1790s, they launched a full-scale effort to re-enslave black Haitians, and the ensuing war destroyed most of the colony. Only in 1804 did Haiti gain its independence.



But its travails were only beginning. Much of the country was destroyed and devoid of industrial infrastructure. Even worse, the possibility of the Haitian Revolution inspiring slave revolts elsewhere led to fierce hostility from the US and Western European governments, who isolated the new government and even forced Haiti to pay 90 million francs—about ten times its annual revenue, and equal to \$12.7 billion today—in “reparations” to France for the loss of its slaves! The US, meanwhile, denied recognition to Haiti’s government until 1862. It took until 1947 for Haiti to repay its “debt” to the former slaveowners.

Twentieth-century interventions by foreign powers proved even more disastrous. The US military occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934, claiming that Haitians weren’t ready for democracy. Before it left, the US ensured that a government friendly to US interests was in power and also trained a large police force to repress any future revolts. From 1957 to 1986, Haiti was ruled by the brutal and corrupt Duvalier family dictatorship, which enjoyed firm support from the US government as it repressed dissent and embezzled at least \$504 million in public money. The dictatorship and the Haitian oligarchy gladly adhered to economic policies promoted by the US, which decided that Haiti should focus on providing cheap labor and raw materials for the developed countries rather than developing its own industrial base and diversifying



its economy. The dictatorship also accumulated \$844 million in foreign debt to Western governments and financial institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, who used that debt and the promise of additional loans as leverage to make sure Haiti adopted economic policies that only left it further impoverished. An opportunity for change came with the election of the progressive priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1990. However, Aristide was overthrown by US-funded military forces in 1991. In 1994 he was reinstated, but under strict orders from the US to implement neoliberal policies that reinforced sweatshop labor conditions and opened the country to an influx of cheap food imports from the US which further undermined Haiti’s farmers and the country’s ability to feed itself. Aristide was reelected in 2000, but in 2004 the US and Haitian militaries overthrew him again, and he remains in exile in South Africa. In the meantime, a corrupt oligarchy of Haitians controls the government and has banned Aristide’s *Lavalas* party

from elections. A UN “peacekeeping” force has meanwhile committed many human rights violations against the population. Today Haiti is the poorest country in the Americas and has the seventh-most-unequal distribution of wealth in the world.

Haiti’s history has not been *all* bleak. In fact, from slave revolts to the Haitian Revolution, to popular mobilizations against the Duvalier dictatorship and neoliberalism, ordinary Haitians have often come together to fight poverty, racism, and other problems, as we’ve seen in the aftermath of the earthquake. If our Haitian brothers and sisters can maintain their courage in the face of such enormous suffering, the least we can do is support them. For ideas on how to do so, get in touch with SJA at www.sbusja.com or by emailing sbusja@gmail.com. We meet every Wednesday at 7pm in the third-floor Skylight Lounge of the Student Activities Center.

Good Books on Haiti

- Charles Arthur and Michael Dash, eds., *Libète: A Haiti Anthology* (Princeton, 1999) [*an especially good introduction to Haitian history, politics, and culture]
- CLR James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd edition (NY, 1963)
- Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville, 1990)
- Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2004)
- David Geggus and Norman Fiering, eds., *The World of the Haitian Revolution* (Bloomington, 2008)
- Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill, 2000)
- Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *Haiti: The Breached Citadel*, revised edition (Toronto, 2004)
- Paul Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti*, 3rd edition (Monroe, ME, 2006)
- Randall Robinson, *An Unbroken Agony: Haiti, from Revolution to the Kidnapping of a President* (NY, 2008)
- Alex Dupuy, *Haiti in the World Economy: Class, Race, and Underdevelopment since 1700* (Boulder, 1989)