

# Ethnic Power and Social Subversion: The **Battalions of the Blacks**

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**S**ince XVI free Blacks and Mulattos were part of the defense system of the Spanish Crown. This participation was especially noticeable in Cuba, Santo Domingo and Puerto Rico because of the lack of indigenous population. Belonging to the military was a way of upward mobility for these races and gave them access to small, but important privileges.

From the start, this militia participated in the defense of villages and towns from the attack of pirates. They were so successful that during the first part of the XVII century, the governor of Havana organized a militia composed of 100 free mulattos, to whom he conceded certain privileges such as the right to carry arms, and to bury their leaders in the main Church. These privileges were normally denied the black and mulatto population.

By the beginning of the XVIII century, Havana had four army groups of mulattos and four of blacks.

It is important to mention that these battalions courageously defended Havana from the English troops in 1762. ninety six of their members died in battle, showing great courage and ability in battle. This participation was commended in the Sermon of the Flags given by Dr. Rafael del Castillo on July 30, 1763. These facts were undoubtedly taken into

consideration by the Army leader Alejandro O'Reilly, who was commissioned by the Crown to reorganize the island's defense in 1764. He rounded up 800 Blacks and Mulattos for Havana and another battalion of the same size for Santiago de Cuba and Bayamo. Blacks and Mulattos constituted 32% of the army. In 1765 an artillery was formed of 100 black slaves.

These battalions were given uniforms and sabers, the same as the white troops. Both battalions carried their flags with the Borgoña Cross and the words "Glory is always forward bound"; and in addition, on the flag belonging to the mulattos, the words "To Win or Die" which have remained throughout history.

As mentioned before, to belong to these battalions was a sign of prestige and upward mobility. The leaders were chosen by the Commander of the Island. At the beginning to belong to these battalions didn't cost anything but as time went by and the needs of the Spanish Crown increased, after 1818, donations of 1000 pesos were required if someone wanted to be an officer. For this reason, only people with money could aspire to the officer positions.

The militia had responsibilities that needed to be fulfilled but they also had certain privileges such as tax exemption

# and Mulattos from Cuba

from certain things. They were judged by military law and had access to legal advice. Their prerogatives were similar to those of the veteran troops' officers. After 20 years of service they had access to lifetime benefits, which they were also given when wounded in battle.

The battalions of mulattos and blacks participated in several campaigns outside of Cuba: in 1777 in New Orleans; in 1781 in Pensacola; and in 1782 on Providence Island. In 1802 these battalions were given a salary increase when they were sent to fight against the Apalachians. In 1820, Blas Crespo was a commander of these troops in Saint Augustin, Florida. The blacks and mulattos had participated in the defense of Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo. These are just some examples of the use that these troops were put to. This also explains the relation that was established between the Battalion of the Blacks and Mulattos and the Haitian revolution, which was caused not only by the influence of the slaves, as has been traditionally said, but also because of the acknowledgement that the Spanish Crown gave to the main Haitian leaders that lead the slave revolt. These men were armed and converted into brigadiers of the Spanish army, as members of the auxiliary black troops in Santo Domingo.

Several noteworthy participants were: Jose Antonio Aponte, Clemente Chacon, Salvador Ternero, Juan Barbier, Jose del Carmen Peñalver and Xavier Pacheco. All of them were condemned to the death sentence.

Aponte wrote a book in which on each of the 70 pages there was a reproduction of a scene. The most interesting were those containing pictures recording great things done by the Battalion of the Blacks and Mulattos. One of the pages showed a picture of Juan Jose Ovando, first Captain of the Battalion of the Mulattos in 1701. He also drew pictures of his grandfather, Captain Joaquin Aponte, leading 600 men against the British, Lt. Hermenegildo de la Luz, Jose Antonio Escobar, and Captain Nicolas Aponte, riding a horse, taking prisoners.

Several important documents written by Carlos, King of Castilla prove the importance of the blacks and the mulattos in the army and the privileges they received.

To analyze the relation of the so called "Aponte Conspiracy" with the campaign in Haiti, you must go back to 1793. In that year, after the execution of Luis XVI and the rupture in the relations between France and Spain, Joaquin Garcia, governor of the Spanish part of Santo Domingo, tried to befriend the

commanders of the slaves who had rebelled and all of the inhabitants of Santo Domingo who proclaimed enmity towards the Republic. Towards this end, he gave the black leaders arms and other military equipment, land, and other privileges such as the ability to become Spanish citizens, and offering them the position of Brigadier General of the Royal Spanish Army.

These propositions were accepted initially by Jean Francois, Biassou and Jannot, and later by Toussaint Louverture who led an army of 600 men. All four generals had been slaves. These forces, which were part of the Spanish Army on the island, were called the "Auxiliary Black Troops". That same year, the first troops were sent from Havana. On March 3, with more than 1000 men from Havana and New Spain, the Marquis of Casa Calvo marched to Riviere du Mole where he set up base.

The link between the Haitian process and the Black battalions was established, and all of the participants of this fight were sent to Cuba. Because of this, a rumor begun that would later influence some of the integrants of the Free Black Battalion from Havana and other places where the Auxiliary Black Troops were sent such as Yucatan and Guatemala. This has not been a well known fact until now.

In 1812, when the revolt began, General Gil Narciso stopped at Havana on his way to Santo Domingo. He was part of the auxiliary black troops and had been in Havana in 1796. Some of the military men who accompanied him during his second stay had also participated in the Haitian campaign. Even though the Spanish authorities could never prove the relation between these

military men and the revolutionaries, they were made to abandon the island of Cuba.

There are certain things that prove the above relation such as documentation belonging to Clemente Chacon that linked him to Henri Christophe: a book called "Fidelisimos Dominios" which stated that the president of Haiti, Enrique Cristobal, had contested his part in the death of "our beloved general Juan Sanchez Ramirez". A transcript of the "General Order of the Army", on Sunday, March 3, 1811 in Cape Henry signed by Lt. General P. Roman and Henrique Cristobal (Henri Christophe). There were also two other documents "Generosos Dominicanos" written by Jose Nuñez de Caceres in Santo Domingo in April, 1811, and another titled "Fidelisimos Dominicanos y Amados Patriotas" written by the same person in February, 1811.

Since the failed conspiracy in 1812, and in spite of the fact that the main leaders of the blacks and mulattos didn't participate in it, they declared their loyalty to Spain, and with this there was fear that the blacks and mulattos would participate in these subversive activities. Several different societies were created such as the Bethlehem Society (Sociedad de Belen), also known as the Flower of Portugal; the Inhabitants of the Moon (Habitantes de la Luna); the French; the Moros; the English; the Celestial Cord; and the Businessmen. The creole joined these and the above associations since they couldn't belong to the nation's official parties. Under the auspices of these societies and with pretext of planning parties and other social festivities, many conspiracies were planned. The members of these soci-

eties used pseudonyms such as “Almer Serlin Sultan Emperor of Arcapadosia, or Prince of Transylvania, Lord of the Dead Waters, and many others.

An example of the continuity of conspiracy attempts and the relation with the black militia is the 1839 movement headed by Lt. Pilar Borrego and by Captain Leon Monzon, members of the Black Battalion. All of the members of this process belonged to the Dance Academies and used different pseudonyms as identifiers.

Among Monzon’s belongings, several documents were found that contained information and names of the members of these societies. One of these documents was the copy of the Spanish Constitution of 1812; a proclamation called “Constitutional Liberation” written in April, 1925; a pamphlet titled Liberty and Tyranny, written in 1832 with the name of 110 associates. Both Borrego and Monzon were banned from Cuba.

The Battalion of the Mulattos and the Black had become a very dangerous institution for the politicians, especially in a society marked by social differences caused by the color of the skin. Because of this, after the so called conspiracy of “The Stairs” (La Escalera), all blacks, mulattos and slaves were decommissioned.

In the second half of the XIX century, political unrest caused the reorganization of the Spanish Army on the island and again the Black and Mulatto militia was reactivated, but this time with gross inequalities. The reactivation was approved by the Royal Order on September 30, 1858. This was accompanied by dispositions that were totally different for whites than for blacks and

mulattos. One example of this was the salary which was 34 pesos for whites, 10 for mulattos and 8 pesos for blacks.

These and other unjust measures were the reason why the new militia was rejected by the blacks and mulattos, as the privilege of belonging to it no longer no longer existent. Members were recruited against their will and massive desertions took place. The militia was deactivated after the first war of independence in 1868.

The elements that reinforce the prestige of blacks are linked to the Battalion of the Mulattos and Blacks and show the level of their knowledge in military affairs, in conspiracy movements, and their aspirations to prestige and upward mobility. All of this information should continue to belong to history and be transmitted from generation to generation.

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