

The Role of Africans in the American Revolution.

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[The King of England] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. The piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian King of Great England. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce. That this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which *he* has deprived them by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another". (Kaplan 1973, p.25)

This passage, which at least one modern historian still sees fit to describe as "a lengthy diatribe" (see Schecter p.144), did not appear in the final draft of the Declaration of Independence (1776). In Jefferson's original, which was not published until it appeared in his Autobiography three years after his death in 1826, it followed the sentence citing British attempts to encourage "the merciless Indian Savages" to attack colonial frontiers; but the Second Continental Congress deleted it before it would approve the Declaration, replacing it with the familiar line: "He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us". These sentences struck from the United State's founding document are important ones for understanding the role of blacks in the American Revolution, and their removal a sign of the controversy that surrounded the issue of slavery. From the black perspective, the Revolutionary spirit of liberty behind Jefferson's Declaration never materialized, and their extensive participation in the Revolutionary wars failed to yield the changes for which they fought.

Until the time of the Revolution, attempts to stop the slavery upon which colonial prosperity was being built fell into two categories. On the one hand, the influx of African slaves during the eighteenth century saw the black population grow from only 4,000 in 1700 to almost 700,00 by the time of the first census in 1790. By the time of the Revolution, some blacks had been in the colonies for generations: the first slaves were sold to the colony of Jamestown by a Dutch trader in 1619 (Katz, p.20). But the great majority of slaves were African born. The threat of insurrection was very real to the colonists and time and again throughout the eighteenth century their emerging governments attempted to levy prohibitive duties upon the trade to prevent the influx of further Africans, and discouraged their existing slaves from thoughts of insurrection by punishing conspirators with hanging, burning at the stake, and public torture (see Nash pp.199-201; Kaplan 1973, p.66). DuBois sums up these first kind of initiatives against slave trade well: "As a whole, it may be said that whatever opposition to the slave trade there was in the plantation colonies was based principally on the political fear of insurrection" (p.23)

On the other hand, the voice of the Quakers, whose earliest written protests to slavery date

from 1668, was marginal but clear: Christianity and slavery were not compatible. A small but vocal tradition of ideological resistance to slavery persisted throughout the eighteenth century, especially in Philadelphia and in Boston, through the efforts of both black and white liberationists, constantly petitioning and preaching against what they saw to be a moral corruption not so much on an individual as a collective level, threatening the very future of the society embodying the pilgrim's dreams to end persecution. James Otis, patriot and orator against slavery, inspired many petitions in Boston and elsewhere to bring an end to slavery as well as British taxes so that all might find freedom in the colonies.

Many such abolitionists volunteered to fight for their Patriot masters in return for a promise or at least a hope of freedom (see Kaplan 1973 pp.11-14), and among the colonists gathered to confront the Redcoats on April 19th 1775 were numbered many black Minutemen, no doubt mindful of Crispus Attucks' sacrifice as they fired those shots which were heard around the world. Two months later, at the Battle of Bunker Hill, scores of black soldiers were amongst the patriots holding their fire until they saw the whites of British eyes. Peter Salem, although not the only black hero of Bunker Hill, is the most famous, thanks to his immortalization in John Trumbull's famous portrait. To his great honor he was presented to George Washington as the brave soldier who had slain the notorious British Major Pitcairne: and yet his image was effaced from later reproductions of Trumbull's portrait, while Peter Salem himself lived the rest of his life in freedom but poverty, dying in 1816. Another black hero, Prince Esterbrooks, was not only wounded in that battle but went on to serve in almost every major campaign of the revolution. Salem Poor was another celebrated black veteran of Bunker Hill, later serving at both Valley Forge and White Plains. So it was that a year before the Declaration of Independence was written, black soldiers were fighting at Lexington, Concord and Bunker Hill.

Of the two reasons motivating Colonial resistance to the British slave trade, the former was not really an attempt to eradicate slavery, but rather an attempt to prevent the growth of a population too powerful to be subjugated, and so a combination of the persistence of British slave traders and steady demand for more labor meant the frustration of central Colonial control of the trade. The latter remained a voice marginal from a political perspective if not an ideological one, and although significant in shaping the situation in Philadelphia, slavery can be said to have grown largely unchecked in the early and mid eighteenth century throughout the colonies, and the uneasy alliance between legislative control motivated by economics and ideological opposition motivated by religion led to a complex participation in the Revolution by blacks.

1760-1787 was a period of pronounced effort to regulate, limit or totally prohibit the slave traffic. But laws of colonies had no unity prior to 1774: the Revolution can be said to have changed this - from the mid 18th century when the British were trading on average 163 ships annually, the influx continued through 1774, which year saw 167 ships of slaves arrive. But by 1779 the number had fallen to only 28 shiploads, although the trade was back to former levels by 1786. (DuBois, p.47). DuBois identified six reasons leading to the concerted effort against the slave trade in the Revolution: 1. economic failure of slavery in the North; 2. a new popular philosophy of "freedom" and the "rights of man" with which a slave trade seemed incongruous; 3.

fear of insurrection, encouraged by the British; 4. saturation of markets by 1774-5 - with prices of domestic stocks of unsold slaves slumping, the way to restore prices was by stopping supply; 5. acquiescence to this last by traders; 6. a means of attack upon British economy.(pp.47-8).

Thus the reasons for the slump in slave trade during the revolution at best coincided with the idealism of moral aims championed by the Quakers: but such high ideals cannot be said to have caused the temporary break in slave trade. It was nevertheless a move in the right direction, and sustained local pressure resulted in much piecemeal legislation. The trend began with Virginia, who by August 1774 had legislated that "We will neither ourselves import, nor purchase any slave or slaves imported by any other person after the first day of November next, either from Africa, the West Indies, or any other place". These sentiments were mirrored in legislation appearing throughout Northern States also; but such resolve had weakened to a twenty-year program to "phase out" the trade by the time the Constitution was being written by Congress in June 1776.

The revolutionary optimism of the liberationists ran aground upon the motives that the Charleston Chamber of Commerce summed up in their convention of July 6, 1774: "The planters are greatly in arrears to the merchants; a stoppage of importation would give them all an opportunity to extricate themselves from debt. The merchants would have time to settle their accounts, and be ready with the return of liberty to renew trade". (cited by DuBois, p.49) The first Continental Congress of September 1774 unanimously resolved to "import no goods from Great Britain after December 1, 1774", including slaves. By May 1775, Congress was able to establish this ban upon the loosely federated nation. But by April 1776 this resolve had been compromised, and within ten years slave trade was fully re-established to former levels. During the war and its temporary stemming of the trade, slave prices did indeed rise and smugglers made fortunes (DuBois p.53).

But by 1784 availability was re-established and the lack of any real consensus to action began the next seven decades of renewed slave importation. The issue of slavery occupied no position of real importance on the agenda of the first Federal Convention of 1787; Article I Section 9 of the Constitution stating "The Migration or importation of such persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the year 1808, but a tax or duty may be imposed on such importation, not exceeding ten dollars for each person". (cited by DuBois p.66) Quaker response to this effective protection of the institution of slavery for twenty years, was clear: "these words, dark and ambiguous, such as no plain man of common sense would have used, are evidently chosen to conceal from Europe that in this enlightened country, the practice of slavery has its advocates among men in the highest stations".

The situation of slaves in pre-revolutionary America differed in the North and the South. In New England and the middle states of New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia, slaves worked in farming and domestic roles and formed less than ten percent of the population. In the Carolinas, Georgia and Virginia, slave labor was concentrated in plantations and constituted between twenty and fifty percent of local populations. In the thirteen states of the Union, the slave population accounted for about 20% of the total.

From the night of the Boston massacre (March 5th 1770), Africans were involved in every episode of the Revolution. Their participation on the side of their patriot masters in the North attested to the libertarian hopes amongst black slaves in New England. On that night, the first casualties of patriots at British hands marked the outbreak of open hostility between England and the American colonies, and foremost amongst the five killed was Crispus Attucks, the slave who had fled his master and gone to sea some 20 years prior. Black minutemen were among those firing the shots "heard around the world" at Lexington and Concord, and there can be little doubt that the prevalent slogan of "Liberty or Death" must have meant even more to slaves than to freemen in the colonies.

But as the focus of the Revolution moved South, where the rhetoric of liberty was heard less than the explicitly economic grievances with the English, the role of the slaves in the war became more complicated. The British quickly realized that offering the plantation slaves liberty in exchange for desertion would serve both to bolster English forces and undermine American ones. The military potential stored in black slaves was not lost on either side in the Revolutionary war. John Adam's diary for September 24, 1775 states what events would soon prove also to have been in British minds:

Gentlemen ... from Georgia and South Carolina ... say that if one thousand regular troops should land in Georgia, and their commander be provided with arms and clothes enough, and proclaim freedom to all the negroes who would join his camp, twenty thousand negroes would join it from the two provinces in a fortnight. The negroes have a wonderful art of communicating intelligence among themselves; it will run several hundreds of miles in a week or a fortnight.

John Murray, Earl of Dunmore and the Crown's representative in Virginia, would prove that black forces were indeed easily mobilized against the colonialists in November 1775, when he declared martial law in Virginia and announced amnesty for all slaves joining His Majesty's forces. And the integration of the enslaved population which Adam says facilitates "communicating intelligence" could be linked to the services of several prominent black espionage agents on the Patriot side (the most famous being James Lafayette), as well as attesting to an oral culture amongst Africans of no less significance in the understanding of the period's history than the literate culture of the ruling colonists.

Six months before Dunmore announced his amnesty, rumors of its possibility brought runaway volunteers to the Governor's House. (Quarles, 1988 pp.38 ff) But it was not until the formal declaration of November 15 that Dunmore's tiny army of 300 loyalist and British troops was opened to any slave willing to desert his master. Within a week, the size of Dunmore's army had doubled, and the new black soldiers were outfitted in uniforms with the inscription "Liberty to Slaves" printed across their breast. Dunmore officially designated them "Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment". As the British had retreated to water, the knowledge of several black slaves of local waterways led to their being appointed pilots of battleships. Runaways caught by colonist patriots before escaping were executed or sent inland to work in the lead mines. The battle of Great Bridge was the only action Dunmore's regiment saw, and that, ironically, failed thanks to the

espionage of a black freeman called William Flora which led to Dunmore underestimating the strength and readiness of his enemy. On December 9th, Dunmore's force of six hundred battled Woodford's Second Virginia Regiment, losing the battle and retreating. By the end of the following Spring, an outbreak of smallpox had killed half of the Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment, and in August the ships fled Virginia to join battles in the North.

In 1778, Joseph Galloway, a Pennsylvania Tory estimated that the black forces susceptible of mobilization were in the vicinity of 150,000. (see Kaplan pp.63-67) A broadside of 1777 by an anonymous "Antibiastes" urged American patriots to liberate their slaves so that they might serve their new country before they deserted to British forces: "Our non-emancipated soldiers are almost irresistibly tempted to desert to our foes, who never fail to employ them against us". Records show at least four other black regiments beside Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment fought for the Crown against the patriots. When the British Armies withdrew at the war's end, at least 14,000 blacks went with them. Between 1775 and 1783, South Carolina alone lost 25,000 slaves through war casualties, desertion and escape (DuBois p.19).

Slaveholders in the Continental Congress had Washington halt enlistments of negroes and passed laws to prevent negroes arming themselves. By the end of the first year of independence, legislation was underway in Massachusetts to end slavery: but at 1787 Philadelphia Constitution writing the 55 senators upheld slavery and gave white male citizens 3 votes for every 5 slaves they owned... Richard Allen, Negro leader had a "kneel-in" that day as George Mason wrote the bill of rights

In evaluating the role of blacks in the American Revolution, it is necessary to take into account that the difference between the British Empire and the United States can have been of small significance to Africans, compared to the gulf between white and black in the colony into which s/he had been sold. At the outset certain assumptions can be made concerning black culture in this era. It was dispersed and so localized; any individual, scarcely able to know what had become of their kin, could focus only upon immediate surroundings for identity. Although there is evidence that blacks did perceive themselves as holding some degree of power in unity, this generation of displaced Africans must be seen as a massively traumatized mix of fragments from ancient traditional cultures yet to formulate any clear sense of their identity within the articulations of power which determined their lives, and so unable to formulate unified strategies for fighting the oppression governing their existences.

In his study of the role of Africans in the American Revolution, Benjamin Quarles writes "The Negro's role in the Revolution can be best understood by realizing that his major loyalty was not to a place nor to a people, but to a principle" (Quarles 1961, p.vii). In so far as the African, shattered by a cultural displacement whose violence is unequalled in all but the worst pages of human history, must have focused whatever hopes remained for the future upon revolutionary change, Quarles is right. But in so far as places, people and principles are inseparable, the black role in the American Revolution cannot be understood as an African espousal of a "concept" of freedom, as European as the slave masters who were growing rich on black labor. But although

from the perspective of the white masters, Africans were unified as an homogenous group in virtue of their slavery, it is not so clear that one single black perspective can be spoken at the time of the revolution, much less principles uniting a people internally. Those born in the colonies were rarely raised by their parents, family ties amongst slaves not being conducive to servility. Black struggle in this period must be understood as having been a search to find a way back to a freedom which could never mean the same thing in this new land as it had before being enslaved, if only because there could have been no conception of what the tribal African had to lose before it was taken away. A rupture had occurred which tore millions of people out of ancient cultures and unwillingly imprisoned them in the history of the West. The survivors adapted in as many ways as they could in the situations in which they found themselves. The role of Africans in the Revolution was complicated by many factors, but there can be no doubt that the time was one in which a new culture was in the very process of formation: that of the African-American. The betrayal of the Africans at this early stage was determinative of the development of that culture during the generations to come.

Ein Wahn in der Lehre vom Umsturz. — Es giebt politische und sociale Phantasten, welche feurig und beredt zu einem Umsturz aller Ordnungen auffordern, in dem Glauben, dass dann sofort das stolzeste Tempelhaus schönen Menschenthums gleichsam von selbst sich erheben werde. In diesen gefährlichen Träumen klingt noch der Aberglaube Rousseau's nach, welcher an eine wundergleiche, ursprüngliche, aber gleichsam verschüttete Güte der menschlichen Natur glaubt und den Institutionen der Cultur, in Gesellschaft, Staat, Erziehung, alle Schuld jener Verschüttung beimisst. Leider weiss man aus historischen Erfahrungen, dass jeder solche Umsturz die wildesten Energien als die längst begrabenen Furchtbarkeiten und Maasslosigkeiten fernster Zeitalter von Neuem zur Auferstehung bringt: dass also ein Umsturz wohl eine Kraftquelle in einer mattgewordenen Menschheit sein kann, nimmermehr aber ein Ordner, Baumeister, Künstler, Vollender der menschlichen Natur. — Nicht Voltaire's maassvolle, dem Ordnen, Reinigen und Umbauen zugeneigte Natur, sondern Rousseau's leidenschaftliche Thorheiten und Halblügen haben den optimistischen Geist der Revolution wachgerufen, gegen den ich rufe: „Ecrasez l'infame!“ Durch ihn ist der Geist der Aufklärung und der fortschreitenden Entwicklung auf lange verscheucht worden: sehen wir zu — ein Jeder bei sich selber — ob es möglich ist, ihn wieder zurückzurufen!

(Nietzsche, *Menschliches Allzumenschliches* vol I, §463)

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