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Biassou, Jorge

By: Landers, Jane G.

(c. 1760–c. 1801),

Haitian revolutionary, was born a slave in Cap Français (or Guarico, in Spanish), on the northern coast of Saint Domingue, in modern Haiti. Spanish documents give his parents' names as Carlos and Diana, and Biassou and his mother were the slaves of the Holy Fathers of Charity in Cap Français, where Biassou's mother worked in the Hospital of the Holy Fathers of Charity, probably as a laundress or cook. Biassou's father's owner and occupation are unknown.

In 1791 Biassou joined Boukman Dutty, a slave driver and coachman considered by the slaves to be a religious leader, and Jean-François, also a slave from the Northern Plains of Saint Domingue, in leading the largest slave revolt in the Western Hemisphere on—the richest sugar colony of its day, French Saint Domingue. Boukman was killed in November of 1791, only three months into the revolt, and Biassou and Jean-François assumed command of the rebel slave forces of the North. Jean-François decorated himself with the Cross of St. Louis, an aristocratic military order. Biassou titled himself the Viceroy of the Conquered Territories, and Toussaint-Louverture, a freeman who had once been a slave on the Bréda plantation, became aide and physician to Biassou's large army of forty thousand men, all former slaves.

Unable to feed and supply such a large force for very long, Jean-François and Biassou attempted to secure the general amnesty promised in late 1791 by the French Assembly. This decree promised to forgive “acts of revolution” for rebels who “returned to order” (Dubois, 125). They sued for peace in exchange for their own freedom and political rights and those of their families and officers, but the reactionary planters of Saint Domingue unwisely rejected their offer. Biassou angrily ordered the execution of all his white prisoners, vowing that they would pay “for the insolence of the [Colonial] Assembly which has dared to write to me with so little respect” (Landers, 209). Toussaint stayed his superior's order, but the bloody fighting continued.

In the spring of 1793 England and Spain both declared war on France and began to court Biassou and Jean-François, whose troops by that time were almost in a starving state. Commissioner Léger Félicité Sonthonax, one of three civil commissioners sent to represent the new French Republic in Saint Domingue, also offered freedom and alliance in the name of the French Republic, but some rebels considered this a trick and believed only a king could make and keep such a promise. Jean-François and Biassou allegedly responded, “Since the beginning of the world we have obeyed the will of a king. We have lost the king of France but we are dear to him of Spain who constantly shows us reward and assistance. We therefore cannot recognize you until you have enthroned a king” (Landers, 210).

Spain designated its new armies of risen slaves the Black Auxiliaries of Charles IV. The Spanish captain general and governor of Santo Domingo (the Spanish name for Saint Domingue) ceremoniously decorated Jean-François, Biassou, and Toussaint with gold medals bearing the likeness of the king and presented them with documents expressing the gratitude and confidence of the Spanish government. Newly supplied and under a Spanish flag, the forces of Jean-François, Biassou, and Toussaint fought many bloody battles against the French, but when the French Assembly finally abolished slavery in May of 1794, Toussaint broke with the Spaniards and offered his services and loyalty to the French Republic. Jean-François and Biassou remained loyal to Spain.

In 1795 Spain and the directory of the French Republic, the ruling body of the new French Republic, finally concluded a peace treaty by which Spain ceded western Hispaniola to the French and agreed to disband the Black Auxiliaries of Carlos IV. On the last day of December 1795, the exiled black troops sailed away for Havana, Cuba, on a small flotilla of four ships, but Cuban officials refused to let them disembark. After much angry correspondence, Jean-François and twelve of

his military subordinates, along with their extended families, totaling 136 persons, sailed away from Havana for Cádiz, Spain. The remainder of Jean-François's troops was dispersed to various parts of Central America. In January of 1796 Biassou traveled with his immediate household of five, his slave, and seventeen other dependents to Spanish-held St. Augustine, Florida.

Biassou had enjoyed a position of command for five years before he settled in Florida, and his proud demeanor immediately alienated the Spanish governor, who had arranged lodging for Biassou and his immediate family and sent two nights' supper to the house, only to have Biassou complain that he had not been invited to dine at the governor's home. The black general walked the streets of St. Augustine in fine clothes trimmed in gold, a silver-trimmed saber, and a fancy ivory and silver dagger. The gold medal of Charles IV must also have impressed the townspeople, but the governor wrote, "The slave owners have viewed his arrival with great disgust, for they fear he will set a bad example for the rest of his class" (Landers, 212). Only three months after arriving, Biassou's brother-in-law and military heir, Sergeant Juan Jorge Jacobo, married Rafaela Witten, the daughter of Prince Witten. Like Biassou and Jorge Jacobo, Witten was a member of the free black militia and had served with distinction in 1795 against invaders sponsored by the French revolutionary Edmond Charles Genet, first minister of the French Republic to the United States.

The marriage of Biassou's heir, Jorge, and Witten's daughter, Rafaela, thus united the leading families of both groups of blacks who had allied with the cause of the Spanish king against the forces of French republicanism. Previously, no black militiaman in Florida who served in Spain had held a rank higher than sergeant, but by virtue of his service in Santo Domingo, Biassou still used the title of general. His elevated title thus raised the status of Florida's black militia. Biassou and his troops proved able defenders of Spanish interests in the next decades. In 1800 the Seminole Indians launched a series of violent attacks on outlying plantations; Biassou led the troops in expeditions against the raiders and in border patrols until his sudden illness and death in July of 1801.

When Biassou died, his bereaved family and followers arranged a wake and buried him the following day with full honors in St. Augustine's Tolomato Cemetery. Despite rumors about his possible practice of vodun (the Afro-syncretic religion also known as voodoo) in Santo Domingo, in his last years Biassou had apparently been baptized and so he received a full Catholic burial. After an elaborate mass that included songs, tolling bells, candles, and burning incense, Florida's governor and other persons of distinction accompanied Biassou's cortege to the graveyard. They were accompanied by drummers and an honor guard of twenty members of Biassou's troops, who discharged a volley of gunfire at the grave site. The obligations of military corporatism outweighed any racial distinctions in this ceremony, the public notary attesting that "every effort was made to accord him the decency due an officer Spain had recognized for military heroism" (Landers, 133). The parish priest entered Biassou in the death register as "the renowned *caudillo* (or military leader) of the black royalists of Santo Domingo" (Landers, *A Turbulent Time*, 169).

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Further Reading

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