
Dumas, Thomas-Alexandre

(1762–1806),

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a French Revolutionary War general and the highest-ranking general of African descent in Continental European history, was born on 25 March 1762 in Jérémie in the French slave colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti). His father was Alexandre-Antoine Davy de la Pailleterie, a renegade French aristocrat, and his mother was Marie-Césètte Dumas, a black slave. Under colonial regulations, Dumas's social status was determined by his mother's. At the time of his birth, Saint-Domingue was the center of the world sugar trade, and his uncle Charles was a rich plantation owner who dealt sugar and slaves out of an area called Monte Cristo on the north coast of the island. His father, who had lived with Charles, quarreled with him in 1748 and disappeared for thirty years, founding a small cacao plantation near the town of Jérémie, with Marie-Cessette as his concubine. After Charles died in 1773, Antoine sailed to France to claim the family inheritance. To buy passage, he sold Marie-Cessette and her two daughters to another slave owner, but he pawned his favorite, Dumas.

After securing his title and inheritance in France, Antoine sent for the boy, who arrived in 1776, listed in the ship's records as the "slave Alexandre." At 16, Thomas-Alexandre moved with his father, now a marquis, to Paris, where he was educated in the manner of a nobleman and able to circulate in Parisian high society. He trained in swordsmanship with another high-achieving mixed-race man, Joseph Bologne, the Chevalier de Saint-Georges. Antoine spent lavishly on his son, but their relationship cooled when Antoine married his housekeeper and reduced his son's allowance. In 1786, at 24, he decided to enter military service in the Queen's Dragoons. Because French racial laws prevented him from taking the officer's commission due a nobleman, he joined at the lowest rank. When his father forbade him to use the noble family name as an army private, he signed up as "Alexandre Dumas," and went by "Alex."

In 1789, Dumas embraced the French Revolution's ideals and began to make his mark. While his regiment was stationed at Villers-Cotterêts, he met his wife, Marie-Louise Labouret, an innkeeper's daughter, while riding in to rescue her town from brigands. As part of the Army of the North, Dumas was promoted to corporal for his daring feats and strength. He was present at the Champ-de-Mars Massacre of 1791; he later claimed that his actions saved many lives. When a German-Austrian army marched on Paris in 1792 to reimpose the monarchy, Dumas made a name for himself by capturing a large enemy patrol without firing a shot. The Revolution cleared a path for Dumas to rise on his merits by driving aristocratic officers out of the military. He received his first officer's commission as second-in-command—under the Chevalier de Saint-Georges—of the Black Legion, an all-black unit founded by the Saint-Dominguan activist Julien Raimond. In 1793, at the age of 32, Dumas became the first man of African descent to achieve the ranks of first brigadier general, and then general of division (the equivalent of a four-star general in the US military).

Dumas became not merely a great soldier of the French Revolution but also the highest-ranking black leader in a modern white society before our own time. Dumas's incredible ascendancy as a black man through the white ranks of the French army reflected a key turning point in the history of slavery and race relations, though a turning point as forgotten as Dumas himself would become. In a single decade, revolutionary France ended slavery and initiated the racial integration of its army, its government, and even its schools. As one nineteenth-century historian put it, General Dumas was "a living emblem of the new equality" (Chevrier, 1884 , p. 98).

Dumas was commander-in-chief of three armies: the Army of the Western Pyrenees in 1793; the Army of the West in the Vendée in 1794; and, between these, his greatest command—the Army of the Alps in 1793-1794. The 53,000 white troops then under Dumas's command captured the western Alps along with more than 1,500 enemy soldiers while opening Italy for French conquest. Further feats of heroism cemented his reputation as a warrior. Dumas's strategic intelligence proved pivotal at the 1796 siege of Mantua, but his self-respect then led to a clash with Napoleon. Dumas reacted angrily when his role was omitted from the official report; Napoleon retaliated by giving him a command well below his rank. Fighting with small units across northern Italy, he won back Napoleon's esteem by single-handedly fending off an Austrian squadron. Napoleon praised him as the "Horatio Cocles of the Tyrol," after a Roman hero, and appointed him to govern the conquered province of Trévisan. Later, Napoleon made Dumas commander-in-chief of cavalry in the grandiose and doomed Egyptian Expedition.

In all of his commands, Dumas showed great integrity and commitment to French republican principles. Though the Austrians disparagingly nicknamed him *der schwarze Teufel*—"the Black Devil"—he often sided with victims of oppression, no matter their side. In the midst of the Revolution's bloody chaos, he pushed back against those committing terror, earning the mocking nickname "Mr. Humanity" and narrowly escaping the guillotine himself.

In Egypt—where at one point Egyptians mistook him for "the leader of the Expedition"—Dumas participated in major battles, discovered a large cache of treasure, and was instrumental in quelling the 1800 revolt of Cairo. Once again, his sense of honor put him into disfavor when he criticized Napoleon's leadership during a difficult desert march. Napoleon threatened to shoot Dumas, and Dumas requested to return to France. On the way, his sinking ship sought refuge in the southern Italian city of Taranto, where for two years he languished in an enemy prison, held by the anti-French Holy Faith Army, which kept him incommunicado, poisoned him, and broke him physically. His complete memoir of his captivity is published in Claude Ribbe's *Le diable noir* (2009).

While Dumas suffered in Taranto, Napoleon returned to France and seized power. Though Napoleon's armies eventually freed him, Napoleon's regime was a nightmare for Dumas and all people of color. The dictator dismantled France's post-racial experiment, imposed cruel race laws, reinstated slavery, and sent an invasion force to Saint-Domingue with orders to kill or capture any black in an officer's uniform. He went to equally extraordinary lengths to bury the memory of Alex Dumas, thundering, "I forbid you to ever speak to me of that man!" when former comrades tried to intervene on behalf of the general and his family, who were living in near-destitution. Napoleon also denied Dumas his full pension and admission to the Legion of Honor. Earlier, he had Dumas replaced with a blond hussar in a painting by Girodet he had commissioned to celebrate the French expedition's capture of Cairo's Great Mosque. Bonaparte possibly offered Dumas a post reinstating colonial slavery in 1802 (the French Revolution had abolished it); if so, Dumas refused.

At 43, five years after his return to France, Dumas died on 26 February 1806, in Villers-Cotterêts, of stomach cancer (possibly an after effect of the poisoning he suffered while imprisoned.) If his life resembles the plot of a nineteenth-century novel, it is because it inspired some of the most popular novels of all time: those of his son, Alexandre Dumas. Dumas was every bit as extraordinary as *The Three Musketeers* rolled into one, and Alexandre Dumas's novella *Blanche de Beaulieu* even includes his father as a character. But it was the betrayal and imprisonment he endured in a dungeon on the coast of Naples, poisoned to the point of death by faceless enemies, that inspired his son's most powerful story, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Alexandre Dumas would take a marvelous sort of revenge, infusing his father's life and spirit into fictional characters who have been embraced the world over.

Yet while generations have heaped glory on the name Alexandre Dumas, the great general has remained largely forgotten. The Arc de Triomphe in Paris, commissioned the year Dumas died, and completed in 1836, after Napoleon's demise, has his name inscribed on its south side. The only statue of General Dumas—in a country awash in marble generals—was erected in Paris more than a hundred years after his death, although his son attempted unsuccessfully to get a statue erected as early as 1838. Alexandre Dumas *fils*, the son of the novelist, and a French Academy member, used his influence to get such a statue underway. In 1895, the year Dumas *fils* died, the Grand Chancellor of the Legion of Honor formed a commission to oversee the undertaking, using the artist Alphonse de Perrin de Moncel's design. The statue, funded through subscription, received discharged cannons for its casting as a token of France's debt from the minister of war. During these efforts, Dumas was depicted as a forgotten contributor to Napoleon's glory. As the statue neared completion in 1912, planning missteps prevented its inauguration. After World War I erupted, the issue was forgotten. Dumas's background made the statue controversial, for some perceived it as a glorification of *métissage*, an attack on a "pure" French identity, during the age of the New Imperialism and scientific racism. This perception led to its destruction during World War II. In 1943, at the behest of occupying Nazi forces, French collaborators removed "offensive statues," including Dumas's, to be reused for the war effort.

After World War II, French immigration patterns shifted, resulting in the rise of citizens within the metropole from its former colonies. As part of efforts to encourage cohesion among France's increasingly diverse components, Dumas and his family became recognized heroes of colonial and slave origins. In May 2001, France passed a law named after Christina Taubira, a National Assembly member from French Guiana, declaring the slave trade a crime against humanity. May 10 later became a holiday commemorating slavery's injustice and abolition. Amid such initiatives and Dumas *père's* 2002 interment in the Panthéon, a Paris mausoleum for France's "great men," the intellectual Claude Ribbe, descended from immigrants from Guadeloupe, began campaigning for Dumas's place in the national memory, with the primary goal of replacing the destroyed statue. Forming the Association of the Friends of General Dumas, he sought support from overseas department special interest groups and politicians. After seven years, the Parisian government inaugurated a monument in 2009. The mayor chose Driss Sans-Arcidet's design depicting a set of shackles; one bracelet is closed while the other is open. While representing Dumas's life as a slave and later as a heroic general, it also refers symbolically to all victims of French colonial slavery. The monument is part of UNESCO's global Slave Route Project. That same year, a documentary on Dumas debuted on French television as part of its May 10 programming.

Dumas has other minor commemorative monuments. For example, in 2006, local officials placed a plaque in Savoy to honor Dumas's 1794 victory at Saint Bernard. Commemorations of Dumas also exist around Jérémie, his birthplace in Haiti.

[See also Bologne, Joseph; Dumas, Alexandre; Raimond, Julien; and Taubira, Christiane .]

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See also

Bologne, Joseph <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-50902>>

Dumas, Alexandre <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-73841>>

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