

Slaves Letters to the Governor 1789

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In July 1789, in the French colony of Martinique, the first of what would be many slave revolts began. Prompted by events taking place in France, the slaves of Martinique began to feel more hopeful about the chances of their liberation. In particular, the calling of the Estates-General and growing abolitionist activity in France prompted some slaves into action. Furthermore, rumours began to circulate that the slaves had actually already been liberated, but that local authorities were working to keep the news from reaching them. In the letters below, slaves of Martinique voice their determination to achieve liberty and independence for themselves, reminding the authorities that they have little to lose and everything to gain.

An Anonymous Letter Addressed to M. Molar

28 August 1789

Dear Sirs:

General, Intendant, the Government, Advisers, and other individuals, we know that we are free and that you are aware that rebellious people are resisting the orders of the king. Well, remember that we ne`gres are numerous, and we want to die for this liberty; for we want it and plan to get it at whatever price, even with the use of mortars, cannons, and rifles. Why, for how many hundreds of years, have our fathers been subjected to this fate that still falls on us? Did God create anyone as a slave? The sky and the earth belong to the lord God, along with everything they contain; you have corrupted our ancestors, not only them, but also their descendants. Isn't this horrible, sirs? It must be believed in truth that you are very inhumane not to be touched with compassion for the suffering that we endure. Even the most barbarous of nations would melt into tears if it knew our misery. I will let you think for awhile about how quickly it would seek to abolish such an odious law. But in the end, it is in vain that we seek to convince you by invoking sentiments and humanity, for you have none; but by using blows we will have it, for we see that this is the only way to get anywhere. It will start soon if this prejudice is not entirely annihilated...there will be torrents of blood flowing as powerful as the gutters that flow along our streets.

Sirs,

We have the honor of being

Signed by us, Ne`gres

Letter from the Slaves of Martinique,
29 August 1789

Great General:

The entire Nation of the Black Slaves very humbly begs your august person to accept its respectful homage and to cast a humanitarian eye on the reflections it takes the liberty of presenting to you.

We are not unaware, Great General, of all the negative things that have been presented to you about us; we are painted in such a foul way that even the most solidly virtuous person would have reason to turn against us; but God, who sooner or later always stops the proud plans of men, this God who is so just knows what is deep inside us; he knows that we have never had any project but to patiently accept the oppression of our persecutors. This eternal God, who could no longer suffer so much persecution, must have given Louis XVI, the greatest of monarchs, the charge of delivering all the miserable Christians oppressed by their unjust fellow men....

We have just learned with extreme desperation that the mulattos, far from taking care of their enslaved mothers, brothers, and sisters, have dared claim that we do not deserve to enjoy, as they do, the benefits that come from peace and liberty and are incapable of continuing the hard work that supports the merchants of the white nation and cannot provide any service to the state. This is a great absurdity, and this vile action must demonstrate to you the baseness of spirit of this proud nation and make you see the hate, the jealousy, and all the horror of the disdain this nation has for us....It is not jealousy that forces us to complain about the mulattos, but the harshness they have shown in creating a plan for liberty for only themselves, when we are all of the same family. We do not know, Great General, if you have received the request of the mulattos, but you will receive it soon, and we are happy if we have the good fortune to have reached you before it....

We end our reflections by declaring to you that the entire Nation of Black Slaves united together has a single wish, a singly desire for independence, and all the slaves with a unanimous voice send out only one cry, one clamor to reclaim the liberty they have gained through centuries of suffering and ignominious servitude.

This is no longer a Nation that is blinded by ignorance and that trembles at the threat of the lightest punishments; its suffering has enlightened it and has determined it to spill to its last drop of blood rather than support the yoke of slavery, a horrible yoke attacked by the laws, by

humanity, and by all of nature, by the Divinity and by our good King Louis XVI. We hope it will be condemned by the illustrious [Governor] Viome'nil. Your response, Great General, will decide our destiny and that of the colony. Please send it to the parish priests who will inform us about it at the announcements at the end of mass. We await it with the greatest impatience, but without leaving behind the respect that is due to your dignity, and the Nation asks you to believe it to be, [Great] Grand General, your most humble and obedient servant.

Signed,
The Entire Nation

Taken from: <https://teachwar.wordpress.com/resources/war-justifications-archive/haitian-revolution-1791/#slaves>

Source: Laurent DuBois and John D. Garrigus. 2006. Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's.