

[Bell on Le Glaunec, 'The Cry of Vertieres: Liberation, Memory, and the Beginning of Haiti'](#)

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Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec. *The Cry of Vertieres: Liberation, Memory, and the Beginning of Haiti*. Translated by Jonathan Kaplansky. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. 256 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-228-00140-9.

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In *The Cry of Vertières*, newly translated into English by Jonathan Kaplansky, Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec examines the history and memory of the Battle of Vertières, one of the most pivotal battles in the Age of Revolutions that decided the Haitian War of Independence in November 1803. Le Glaunec sets out to answer three questions: What happened at Vertières? Why has it been forgotten in France? And how has it been remembered in Haiti? In doing so, he makes two key interventions. First, he argues that the French side was deeply traumatized at Vertières, both by the loss of racial and colonial power and by the “genocidal fantasies” that they proposed as a means to reclaim the colony. As a result of this, French accounts silenced and distorted the memory of the battle in ways that continue to resonate in recent historiography on the War of Independence, whether by minimizing the military skill of the Haitian troops, denying or downplaying the genocidal tendencies of the French, or omitting reference to the battle entirely. Second, Le Glaunec argues that memory of Vertières was not deliberately silenced in Haiti. However, it was overlooked until the late nineteenth century, when political leaders began reemphasizing the battle to harness a sense of patriotism, unity, courage, and sacrifice. Le Glaunec concludes that while the memory of Vertières is “pervasive” in Haiti, it is nonetheless “fragile,” prone to invocation as a political ideal rather than a historical event.

Le Glaunec begins with a narrative overview of the Battle of Vertières and the events leading up to it. In chapter 2, he summarizes the course of the French and Haitian revolutions in Saint-Domingue since 1789 before moving in chapter 3 to discuss the events of the battle itself. In doing so, Le Glaunec draws on an impressive range of sources to build an account that goes well beyond the foundational (albeit unreliable) account by nineteenth-century historian Thomas Madiou.[1] In particular, he emphasizes the radical inversion of racial power that the battle exemplified for the French. As the War of Independence drew to a close, it was clear that French colonial power had collapsed. Indeed, Le Glaunec notes that many of the hallmarks of French white supremacist “civilization” and “rationality,” such as the fortified army blockhouses and military hospitals, had become the sites of some of their most abject failures. In contrast, Le Glaunec portrays the Black Indigenous Army, led by General Jean-Jacques Dessalines, as the true inheritors of the rights to life, liberty, and equality that originally had their roots in the French Revolution of 1789.

In chapters 4-6, Le Glaunec examines how and why collective memory of Vertières has been silenced

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in France. Beginning in 1803, he argues, “discursive strategies were put in place aimed at hiding the extent and the conditions of the retreat” (p. 59) in order to avoid confronting the trauma that such conditions represented for the French. Drawing on a wide range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century dictionaries, monographs, teaching resources, and public broadcasts as sources, Le Glaunec argues that when French scholars, journalists, and politicians discussed the War of Independence, they either omitted reference to Vertières altogether, or blamed the outcome on disease, exhaustion, and British intervention, and not on the skill of the Indigenous Army. Le Glaunec argues that such distortions have continued in more recent historiography, pointing to work by scholars including Henri Mézière, François Blancpain, and contributors to Jean Tulard’s *Dictionnaire Napoléon*, who have either misquoted the dates of the battle, or attributed its outcome to British support for the Indigenous Army.[2] Even more than avoiding the humiliation of defeat, Le Glaunec argues, historians engaged in these distortions to avoid confronting the “genocidal tendencies” of the French expeditionary forces during the war. Le Glaunec critiques the current historiography of French violence in Saint-Domingue for failing to account for the development of these tendencies, and in particular historians such as Thierry Lentz, Pierre Branda, and Philippe Girard, who either deny the genocidal intentions of the French or ascribe them to the Haitian leadership.[3] Instead, he argues (in chapter 6) that the French developed such tendencies, clearly and gradually, throughout the War of Independence, the extreme endpoint of a war predicated on denying the humanity of the Black population. While the atrocities committed by the French are often blamed chiefly on Rochambeau, Le Glaunec’s use of correspondence from Generals Rochambeau and Leclerc, Rochambeau’s chief of staff Pierre Thouvenot, and French civilians of Cap-Français enables him to demonstrate that genocide was not the fantasy of a “uniquely sadistic” individual, but was in fact proposed as a French military strategy by multiple military leaders, advisers, and civilians (p. 91).

Chapters 7 and 8 trace the memory of Vertières in Haiti, where, unlike France, it was not strategically forgotten. Today, Vertières is a cultural touchstone: a symbol of unity and victory in the face of adversity, celebrated on the anniversary of the battle, depicted in works of art, and even used as an analogy in sports and politics. Nevertheless, Le Glaunec shows this to be a relatively recent development. Relying on newspapers, textbooks, and government records, he argues that Vertières was overlooked in official commemorations for much of the nineteenth century due to a lack of Haitian history in schools, and the unwillingness of leaders such as Alexandre Pétion and Henry Christophe to memorialize a battle so tightly connected to the memory of Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Vertières only began to be officially memorialized towards the end of the century, fueled in part by a rise in nationalism and by preparations for the centenary of independence.

In the twentieth century, Le Glaunec finds state commemorations of Vertières bound up with contemporary politics; both US-backed President Louis Borno during the US occupation of Haiti, and his post-occupation successor Sténio Vincent used the commemoration of Vertières as a means to position themselves as patriotic Haitian leaders. Le Glaunec argues that Vertières was finally elevated to its current status under President Paul Magloire, during the 150th anniversary of independence. In order to reinvent Haitian cultural nationalism, Magloire funded large-scale events for the anniversary, including public meetings, school programming, literary competitions, and even a reenactment of the battle itself. Finally, it was used by François

Duvalier as a symbol of nationalist self-determination, in order to strengthen his own regime: “Stripped of its historicity,” Vertières under Duvalier became “an ideal ... of which François Duvalier was the sole guarantor” (pp. 132-33).

In chapter 9, Le Glaunec explores the commemoration of Vertières in Haiti today, visiting the key sites of Fort Picolet, Fossé Capois, and Vertières itself. Ultimately, he concludes that while the memory of Vertières is strong in Haiti, it remains fragile, “threatened with oblivion” either through the “obliteration” of physical remains, or by its invocation as a political symbol rather than a historical event (p. 146).

This is a clear and well-argued book that makes a significant contribution to the field of Haitian studies, the history of memory, and the cultural history of war. His tracing of the memorialization of Vertières in Haiti, and its silencing in France, is clear and methodical, bolstered by diverse sources including newspaper articles, government records, textbooks, soccer chants, and works of art. In particular, Le Glaunec’s attention to detail when reconstructing events at Vertières results in a rich, evocative description of the battle itself, as well as the conditions in which it took place. He is particularly effective when it comes to describing the disastrous failures of French colonial power, making a strong case for the extent of French trauma in the War of Independence, which bolsters the second half of his argument as a result. In chapters 4-6, which are perhaps the strongest sections of the book, Le Glaunec makes a powerful case for critically examining the genocidal impulses of the French during the war. His call for further reflection on these “thoughts of annihilation” is a productive and provocative one, which has the potential to generate important new work on this topic. Since the text’s original French publication in 2004, scholars such as Marlene Daut and Julia Gaffield have taken up his call, arguing for a serious reassessment of the emphasis, in French and North Atlantic historiography on the Haitian Revolution and independence, on the violence committed by Haitian troops, and in particular on Dessalines’s massacres of French residents of Haiti in early 1804. This work, coupled with further studies of French colonial violence and the early Haitian state, has the power to reshape how we understand violence and power during the Haitian Revolution.[4] Le Glaunec’s clear, focused writing makes this text readable for scholars and students alike.

Despite the strengths of this text, there are some areas which warrant critique. Le Glaunec occasionally overemphasizes the role of French revolutionary ideology in Haitian revolutionary thought. The French Revolution undoubtedly had a profound effect on the Haitian Revolution, and Le Glaunec is careful to avoid stating that the revolutionaries saw themselves as fighting for French ideals. However, by identifying the origins of Vertières in a “transplanted ‘French’ Revolution” (p. 19), he risks underplaying the importance of non-French influences, such as those from Africa or developed within the colony. Likewise, Le Glaunec’s argument, based on his travels in Haiti, that historical sites risk “obliteration” is not always fully supported by his evidence. At Fort Picolet, for example, which is not formally memorialized as a historic site, Le Glaunec describes the fort as “uncared-for,” rendering the memory of Vertières “fragile.” While the fort is physically fragile, however, his observation that the fort is a focus for Vodou ceremonies honoring Ogou Feray, the *lwa* of “blacksmithing and war,” suggests that local Vodouisants do indeed care for the site and associate it with a collective memory of warfare (pp. 136-37). While such evidence does not undermine his argument, it indicates that it could have been enriched by a more nuanced approach.

Relatively speaking, however, these are minor criticisms. Le Glaunec has produced a thoughtful, rich, and provocative work of scholarship. It represents an important contribution to the fields of Haitian history and the history of memory alike.

Notes

[1]. As Le Glaunec notes in chapter 1, Thomas Madiou's description of the battle, published in *Histoire d'Haïti* in 1840, has been extensively circulated and adapted in textbooks and academic works as the primary source on the battle, partly due to the brilliance of Madiou's writing, and partly due to the praise of other leading scholars such as Beaubrun Ardouin, who accepted it as definitive, and its acceptance by other leading scholars at the time. However, this reliance on and reinterpretation of a single text has led to, in Le Glaunec's words, "a maze of representations" of the battle of Vertières, in which it has become difficult to separate fact from fiction (p. 15).

[2]. Henri Mézière, *Le general Leclerc (1772-1802) et l'expédition de Saint-Domingue* (Paris: Taillandier, 1990); François Blancpain, *La colonie française de Saint-Domingue* (Paris: Karthala, 2004); and Jean Tulard, ed., *Dictionnaire Napoléon*, vol. 2 (Paris: Fayard, 1999). In the latter, Le Glaunec singles out entries by Admiral Dupont and Jean-Marcel Champion.

[3]. Thierry Lentz and Pierre Branda, *Napoleon, l'esclavage et les colonies* (Paris: Fayard, 2006); Philippe Girard, "Caribbean Genocide: Racial War in Haiti, 1802-4," *Patterns of Prejudice* 39, no. 2 (2005): 138-61, and Girard, "French Atrocities during the Haitian War of Independence," *Journal of Genocide Research* 15, no. 2 (May 2013): 133-49.

[4]. Marlene Daut, "All the Devils Are Here: How the visual history of the Haitian Revolution misrepresents Black suffering and death," *Lapham's Quarterly* (October 14, 2020), <https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/roundtable/all-devils-are-here>; Julia Gaffield, "Meet Haiti's founding father, whose black revolution was too radical for Thomas Jefferson," *The Conversation* (August 30, 2018), <https://theconversation.com/meet-haitis-founding-father-whose-black-revolution-was-too-rad...>

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