

## INTRODUCTION



The national colors shall be black and red.

—1805 HAITIAN CONSTITUTION

On the first of January 1934, the republic of Haiti celebrated its 130th anniversary as an independent nation. In a country born from a slave revolt, embittered by a history of regional, color, and class divisions, New Year's Day holds great meaning for Haitians. Yet despite a proud legacy of independence and several decades of attempts to shield their country from aggressive foreign penetration, on the first of January 1934 most Haitians did not consider themselves free. At the central square Champs de Mars, in the capital Port-au-Prince, the United States' red, white, and blue flag flew high, a visual reminder that the Caribbean's first sovereign nation was still in the throes of U.S. marine occupation. On the first of January 1934, independent Haiti resembled a colonized state.

In a few months, however, all this would change. After nearly two decades of U.S. occupation that witnessed popular and intellectual resistance, and a vigorous reevaluation of Haitian national discourse, the occupation was finally nearing its end. Nineteen thirty-four was, according to President Sténio Vincent in his New Year's state of the nation address, "the year of [Haiti's] Second Independence."<sup>1</sup> But if 1934 marked an end to the struggle for *désoccupation*, it was the beginning of a long and intense ideological and political conflict that would ultimately lead, in 1957, to one of the most brutal dictatorships the Caribbean has ever experienced: the regime of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier. It is the story of this conflict that is the subject of this book.

This book is about radical political movements in Haiti and their struggles in the period following the U.S. occupation until the creation of the Duvalierist state. It seeks to remedy a significant absence in the historiography on modern Haiti by investigating the turbulent politics of the post-occupation era, 1934–1957. The saga of the Haitian postoccupation presents a fascinating case of a small Caribbean nation with profound historical connections with the rest of the Americas, confronting the challenges and

legacies of recent foreign control while engulfed in the swirl of World War II and the cold war. Haiti's long history of resistance and independence distinguished the country from colonized Africa and its regional neighbors. Yet the postoccupation predicament, in which radicals with contrasting views of black power, radical nationalism, and Marxism fought for political space, suggests a situation not unlike the postcolonial struggles elsewhere in the world later in the twentieth century.

The postoccupation experience was modern Haiti's greatest moment of political promise. At its outset, black consciousness and an intense cross-class nationalism produced a rare opportunity for lasting political change. These years witnessed the establishment of a popular labor movement; the rise of political parties; a bitter and vibrant ideological struggle; and a shift toward an assertive brand of Haitian black nationalism, *noirisme*, that not only defined the future of Haitian politics, but also prefigured similar developments elsewhere in the Caribbean region. The postoccupation turning point came with the revolution of 1946, which sought to reverse the abuses in Haitian politics laid by the dominant political classes since independence, and continued by the country's rulers in the decade after 1934. However, the revolutionary movement quickly splintered and in its fragmentation created the roots of contemporary political tensions in Haiti.

Although these years involved dramatic and enduring shifts in Haitian political and social life, much of this history is remarkably understudied. At least two factors account for this lacuna. First, the complicated political history that marked the epoch from 1934 to 1957 has quite often discouraged scholars from engaging in serious study of the period. Scholars who have considered the full span of Haiti's political history often regard the postoccupation as merely a continuation of a cyclical pattern of turmoil no different from nineteenth-century contests or more recent upheavals.<sup>2</sup> Few writers have attempted to search the archival sources to unravel the knotted threads of the chronology. Even fewer have explored the broader implications of the various political movements of the era for the history of the region.

Second, historians of twentieth-century Haiti continue to be fascinated with the events, history, and issues associated with both the U.S. occupation and the Duvalierist state (1957–1986), demonstrated in the sizable literature generated on these periods. Most scholars of Haitian politics have tended to compress the interregnum into one or two general chapters that form the postscript or prelude to studies of the occupation or Duvalier.<sup>3</sup>

Departing significantly from these approaches, this book attempts a more

complete political study of these overlooked years in Haitian history. It draws on extensive archival research, previously unused sources, interviews with various political and cultural figures of the era, and a close reading of contemporary accounts and the secondary literature to present a richer and more complicated picture of the interplay among political forces than is suggested in the existing scholarship. More specifically, the book explores the ways in which postoccupation radicalism emerged from being a largely unified elite-led movement in the 1930s to become a wider urban-based popular movement in the 1940s and 1950s that would draft the blueprint for current forms of social protest in Haiti. By exposing these cultural and political complexities and their articulations among radical groups, this study contributes to a broader discussion on the reasons for conflict and crisis in Haiti.

In reconstructing the postoccupation past, the book traces the ideas, activities, and organization of leading radicals. In so doing, it challenges common assumptions of Haitian politics during the period by emphasizing far-reaching ideological, regional, interclass, and social conflicts among groups competing for state control. It also emphasizes the connections between the Haitian experience and similar movements elsewhere in the region by placing Haitian radicalism within a broad context, and illuminating important links that served to invigorate its resistance.

The book's central thesis is that various radical movements issued a powerful challenge to the country's political traditions and transformed its political culture. This impact, however, changed over time, as did the attitudes and struggles of the radicals themselves. Often change was the result of pressure from the dominant social institutions fighting to preserve their threatened hegemony. On the other hand, much of the political conflict that marked the era emerged from internecine rivalries among radical groups that purported to be striving for the same goals. As the following chapters reveal, contingency frequently overshadowed ideological commitment in the formation of political allegiances.

A focus on domestic rivalries alone cannot completely explain this history. One of the crucial points this book stresses is that postoccupation Haiti unfolded in the shadow of sweeping social, cultural, and diplomatic changes in the region, which significantly affected the tone, nature, and prospects of political struggle. As with most other Latin American and Caribbean countries, the specter of U.S. anticommunism loomed large over the island. In Haiti, however, the problem was more complicated, as the strong focus on race, class, and color consciousness by radicals was often blurred in the

perceptions of U.S. officials who were only too willing to label all opposition movements “communist.” This factor greatly affected the relationship between the state and its opponents. The result was a divided opposition that over the two decades increasingly employed violence in its campaign for state power.

### *Haitian Color Politics*

In order to explain the nature of political competition in Haiti, the roles race and color play in Haitian life must be briefly considered. It is important to distinguish between the two. Since independence in 1804, race has long been intricately bound up in the concept of Haitian national identity. Haitians of all social classes take great pride in their country’s place as the first black republic in the western hemisphere. In Haiti, according to Gordon Lewis, “there are, certainly, superior cultures but not superior races,” and this “superior culture exists not because of inherent superiority but because of fortunate circumstances.”<sup>4</sup> This is not to suggest that racial problems do not exist in Haiti. At certain historical moments non-black groups, particularly Arab-Haitians, have been victimized because of racial or ethnic differences.<sup>5</sup> In general, however, social relations tend toward a division between an elite that is *milat*<sup>6</sup> and black, and a dark-skinned black majority.

This cleavage has a long history. In the immediate postindependence years a bitter color dynamic evolved in Haitian politics, marked by a division between the predominantly black-controlled north and the *milat*-controlled south. By the middle of the nineteenth century, *milat* politicians avoiding the question of social divisions cultivated an argument of superiority by claiming that their power was determined by a greater degree of competence. This sentiment was crystallized in Liberal Party ideologue Edmond Paul’s slogan “power for those most capable.” This dictum not only justified *milat* elite control of the state apparatus but also established a political order in which color and class would be closely intertwined.<sup>7</sup> The Liberal ideas of capability and competence collided with those of the National Party, which was largely led by a powerful landed black elite. The Nationalist clarion, “the greatest good for the greatest number,” was used to justify state control by the non-*milat* sectors.

Haitian intellectuals since the nineteenth century have drawn attention to these rivalries and the ways they have infused political life.<sup>8</sup> It was, however, the work of James Leyburn in 1941 that brought the issue into full view and provided an opportunity for a larger academic debate on color

divisions.<sup>9</sup> In his classic study *The Haitian People*, Leyburn argued that social divisions more closely resembled a caste system in which “the two castes are the élite and the masses. They are as different as day from night, as nobleman from peasant; and they as separate as oil and water.”<sup>10</sup> The serious problems of applying a bipartite model of social division to the study of Latin America and Caribbean societies are obvious. Leyburn’s perspective also resulted in severe criticism and led him to draw the regrettable conclusion, four years before the revolution of 1946, that “in the near future it is safe to say that there will be no more black non-élite presidents.”<sup>11</sup> Yet he was correct in emphasizing the close relationship between class and color in Haiti.

David Nicholls, whose book *From Dessalines to Duvalier* is the leading and most influential work on the subject of political ideology and social conflict in Haiti, modified Leyburn’s thesis by stressing the important role of the black middle class, according to Nicholls, which emerged during the occupation and forms an intermediary between the peasants and the light-skinned elite. In his tour-de-force study, which is particularly strong in examining the historical influences on the black middle class, Nicholls argued that color divisions supersede virtually all other issues, particularly class interests, and concluded that “divisions connected with colour have been one of the principal reasons why Haiti has failed to maintain an effective independence.”<sup>12</sup>

A fundamental aspect of Nicholls’s thesis is that the social polarization in Haiti determines the political groups they form. Thus each group supports political elites of a similar class and color background, largely on the expectation that their group interests will be secured. Although one can arguably find such a division operative in nineteenth-century politics, it is an inadequate explanation of twentieth-century political conflict. One of the major shortcomings of this perspective is its failure to properly explain the incongruity between the stated ideological positions of certain political groups, particularly those based on color, and their actions during moments of crisis. To be sure, Nicholls concedes at various points that political rivalries are not always reducible to color and that the “color question” itself is largely the preoccupation of elites with the majority of the nation left out. Still, color remains a central problematic for Nicholls as it does for analyses of Haitian politics. Nicholls’s work, exceptional as it is, also offers little explanation of the agency of non-élite actors in shaping the terms of political debate.<sup>13</sup>

Michel-Rolph Trouillot has offered a thoughtful corrective to some of these problems by arguing that color has several functions in Haitian society. It is misleading, he argues, to view it as the basis of all social divisions. In order to understand its crucial role one must recognize that color assumes

different meanings in cultural, social, and political arenas. These meanings have shifted markedly since independence, much like the “color line” itself, which has resulted in “darker and darker people” being included among the *milat* elite since the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> According to Trouillot, “beliefs and practices that Haitian urbanites refer to as the ‘color question’ do not operate in a social vacuum to the exclusion of all else. Instead color-cum-social categories operate in various spheres of urban life as part of different strategies of competition and struggle.”<sup>15</sup>

This is not to suggest that a focus on color consciousness has little significance in explaining Haiti’s political reality. Nicholls’s insistence that color issues are so embedded in Haitian politics, that even critics of “the color question” are forced to confront it is perceptive. Nevertheless, an analytical framework that focuses solely on color consciousness provides a limited understanding of Haitian politics generally and the history of resistance movements in particular. By separating political actors in groups according to color, scholars have obscured the fact that quite often political contests were guided by factors that went beyond obvious color tensions. This was especially pronounced in the postoccupation period, which witnessed rapid and serious rearrangements of the political order locally and occurred against the backdrop of a global ideological battle. As the evidence and analysis presented in this book suggests, the reactions of political actors were not solely dominated by motives related to color but more accurately grew out of responses to various ideological and political dilemmas. If the frequent discussion of color differences emerged at times of political crisis, it was quite often a surface problem. Concerns over U.S. economic penetration, dictatorship, class issues, and, above all, a bitter competition for control of the state were also important.

The underlying weakness in arguments that emphasize color divisions as most important is the implicit suggestion that political ideology remained unaffected by the series of upheavals that characterized Haiti in the 1930s through the 1950s. One of the central arguments this book advances is that radicalism in postoccupation Haiti was much more fractured and heterodox than scholars have appreciated. Political allegiances among radicals, despite the frequent references to color in political discourse, were not necessarily based on ideological sympathies or color consciousness. Access to state power was quite often the central objective. During the height of Haitian black power in the Estimé years (1946–50), the dominant anti-*milat* rhetoric supported by the regime was weakened by political affiliations between *noiristes* who imposed Estimé and conservative members of the military who

eventually overthrew him. It is this intense contest for political power that not only dashed the hopes of the radical movements during the mid-fifties, but also partially explains the ease with which Duvalier was able to marshal support from rival political forces while maintaining a *noiriste* position in 1957.

This book therefore presents an alternative approach to the study of postoccupation Haiti that moves beyond analyses of color consciousness and Marxist class-based interpretations to include a more rigorous examination of the period, the various political groups, and the social contexts from which they emerged.

### *Protest under the Occupation*

The rise of radicalism in the postoccupation period was in large measure an evolution of various forms of resistance in the occupation years. The U.S. occupation provided ample inspiration for the development of a nationalist movement in the country. Launched in 1915 ostensibly for the collection of loans and to restore civil order—there were five presidents in the previous four years assassinated or forced out of office by coups—the occupation fast exposed its imperialistic character. U.S. control of the customs houses and the institutional racism of the occupiers manifest in the reinstitution of the slavish nineteenth-century *corvée* work system gave rise to popular resistance. In 1919 a rural guerrilla peasant movement of the *cacos*, led by Charlemagne Péralte, was violently quashed by the marines and its principal leaders executed.<sup>16</sup> In Port-au-Prince, however, less direct forms of protest continued. Among the *génération de l'occupation*, a strong sentiment of nationalism emerged and elites, both black and *milat*, resentful of the U.S. presence, pursued other avenues of resistance.

They were aided by developments in public education. The late-nineteenth-century reforms of President Lysius Salomon (1879–88) created greater access to education for many Haitians. For the first time, members of non-elite black families were afforded secondary school training that had largely been the province of the light-skinned elite. The beneficiaries of Salomon's reforms ensured the continuity of this practice in the twentieth century. By 1919 the numbers of students enrolled in urban schools had more than doubled turn-of-the-century figures.<sup>17</sup> To this must be added the increasing centralization of the capital. Although a small number of black professionals had lived in Port-au-Prince since independence, these two changes guaranteed greater access for non-elites to the professional ranks.